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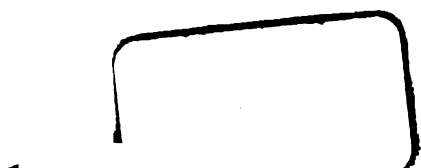
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Not in 17
18 19

THE TIDEWAY

A NOVEL

BY

AUSTIN CLARE B.M.

AUTHOR OF 'FOR THE LOVE OF A LASS' 'A REAL REPENTANCE'
'BY THE RISE OF THE RIVER' ETC.

Ever drifting, drifting, drifting
On the shifting
Currents of the restless main.

* * * *

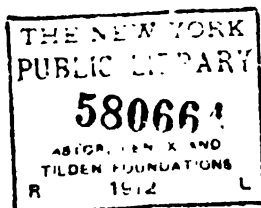
The strong will, and the endeavour
That for ever
Wrestles with the tides of Fate.

LONGFELLOW: *Seaweed*



LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS

1903
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TO MY MOTHER

TO MY MOTHER
TO MY MOTHER
TO MY MOTHER
TO MY MOTHER

NOT VON
ZUGEN
VERFASST

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PROLOGUE	I
I. OVER THE HIGH-BACKED BRIDGE	9
II. A MAIDEN OF OUR CENTURY.	15
III. THE MESSAGE OF DEATH	26
IV. HIS DISCONSOLATE WIDOW	33
V. 'WHAT SOME MEN CAST AWAY' ETC.. . . .	46
VI. WORLDLY AND OTHER-WORLDLY	50
VII. THE PROTECTION OF THE LAW.	57
VIII. A WOUNDED SPIRIT.	66
IX. A SERIOUS QUESTION.	77
X. ONLY A WOMAN, ONLY A ROSE	90
XI. IN THE WAY OF TEMPTATION	100
XII. GREEK MEETS GREEK	109
XIII. HIS HEART'S DESIRE	120
XIV. MEREDITH IS SWEEPED OFF HIS FEET	135
XV. A MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS	144
XVI. 'WHILE THE CHILD WAS YET ALIVE'	153
XVII. IN THE MORNING	159
XVIII. THE COLLAPSE OF A STRONG SWIMMER . . .	169
XIX. OUT OF THE DEEP	182
XX. DRIFTING	193

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXI. PLUCKING THE ROSE	206
XXII. A WORD OF WARNING.	216
XXIII. THE LOVE THAT CASTS OUT FEAR	228
XXIV. HIGH-WATER MARK	239
XXV. NEW AND OLD.	248
XXVI. IN ALL HIS GLORY	258
XXVII. A SCRAP OF PAPER.	265
XXVIII. SHOWS THE SET OF THE CURRENT	274
XXIX. FROM OUT THE YEARS	279
XXX. GILBERT CLAVERING FINDS AN INTEREST IN LIFE	287
XXXI. AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS	297
XXXII. IN THE MAELSTROM	304
XXXIII. TEMPEST-TOSSED	315
XXXIV. THE DECISION OF THE UNDECIDED	325
XXXV. A PLUNGE INTO THE ABYSS	329
XXXVI. AFTERWARDS	338
XXXVII. THE NIGHT WATCHES	345
XXXVIII. A CONFESSION	352
XXXIX. STEMMING THE STREAM.	358
XL. THE TRUCE OF GOD	371
EPILOGUE.	375

THE TIDEWAY

PROLOGUE

Mark me and understand,
While I have power to speak. I charge
You now. TENNYSON: *Enoch Arden*.

THE red tide of battle had rolled across the veldt, leaving the usual wreckage behind it. Men, alive but half an hour before, lay still and dead, strewn, singly and in heaps, upon the blood-stained grass. The bodies of horses, with pathetic, outstretched muzzles, and dull, glazed eyes, lay motionless beside their masters. Piles of cartridge-cases showed where a more than ordinary determined stand had been made. A spent shell rested harmlessly under a tussock of coarse grass. The fragments of another, which had burst and done its deadly work, were scattered among its victims. Here was a Mauser, thrown away in hasty retreat; there, a bandolier, a shattered gun-carriage minus a wheel, a wrecked baggage-wagon. All these things, and many like them, marked the place as a recent battle-field.

But the war-tide had ebbed away and left it solitary. The struggle still raged in the distance, the smoke of the guns—the flash and thunder of the Maxims, the rattle of the Mausers—showing its whereabouts, far across the plain, where one army pressed relentlessly upon its retreating adversary, and drove it, slowly and steadily, towards the river.

But, to this stricken field, where the struggle had begun,

and had been practically decided, the sounds of strife came faint and muffled, like those which touch the ears of a sleeper without awakening him. Yet sounds there were, much nearer at hand, and still more awful. For all were not dead who lay, torn and pierced, among the wreckage of War's fierce storm. The attack had been so sudden and unexpected that the ambulance corps had had neither warning nor time to do its work. Indeed, this fight was not one of those great battles for which due preparation is made, but merely one of the many smaller frays, brought about by cunning on the part of the Boers, and unwariness on that of the British, for which the recent war in South Africa will always be remembered.

The general in command had been marching confidently forward, in the comfortable assurance that the enemy was miles away ; till, all of a sudden, a storm of bullets, coming, as it were, out of the earth at his feet, had roughly undeceived him.

This mangled wreckage upon the veldt was the result. Sighs and moans, which even the most stoical endurance cannot always repress, rose, here and there, from the blood-soaked earth, mingling eerily with the sough of the warm wind sweeping heedlessly across the plain, and with the distant thunder of the fight. Now, the vague babble of a delirious man brought to the parched veldt the name of some green English valley or heathery Highland hill, as visions of shady trees and cool brown burns came to mock the fever-stricken brain. Then, again, all was silent. Only the wind whispered in the grass, and the roar of the distant strife came more and more muffled as the combatants drew further from the field. Some distance apart from the majority of the fallen, under the scanty shadow of a clump of low-growing thorns, lay two sorely-wounded men.

By their uniform they seemed to belong to one of those

troops of mounted infantry which had been raised among the British settlers. The horse of one of them was grazing unhurt beside him. That of the other lay dead, killed, apparently, by the same shell which had wounded its master.

Neither of the men could see his companion in misfortune. The low scrub shut them off from each other as effectually as though it had been a forest. But they could hear the occasional sighs and moans which pain and thirst wrung from them, in spite of fortitude, as from men upon the rack. Presently, one of them revived a little, sat up, and looked around him. His brain, which had been clouded, slowly cleared, and he made the comforting discovery that the bullets of the Boers, though they had given him a lame leg, a broken rib, and a mangled arm, had touched no vital point. He next looked at his dead horse, and whistled feebly.

'A bad job, that !' he murmured under his breath. 'If help doesn't come soon, there'll be no getting away from this, and thirst and fever'll do the business for me, quite as well as though those d——d bullets had hit the bull's-eye. Hang me if I don't feel nearly as bad as though they had ! It's like a red-hot iron in my side. Whew-w-w !' He broke off and listened. Again the moan, which he had heard several times before without being sufficiently himself to pay much attention, came from the other side of the bushes.

'I'm not the only chap left alive in this confounded place,' thought the wounded man. And that desire for companionship and fellowship in misfortune, which is so strong, not only in the human kind, but in the higher orders of the brute creation, such as dogs and horses, braced him to endure the added pain which movement must needs bring with it, rather than remain any longer alone.

With many a groan and exclamation, he dragged himself round the scrub till he was close to his fellow-sufferer.

No sooner had his eyes rested on the latter, however,

than they made a discovery which, for the moment, caused him to forget his sense of personal pain.

'Great Scott !' he cried, 'if it isn't Calvert ! Why, Calvert, old fellow, you've got it badly, I fear. Where are you hit ?'

The other man turned a white face feebly towards the voice, which he seemed to recognise, though the blood-shot eyes already saw but dimly.

'Is it you, Meredith ?' he asked huskily. 'They've done for me, I think. I shall never see old England again.'

'Come, now, it's not so bad as that, I hope, old chap,' said his comrade, bending over him. 'I'm pretty well peppered myself, but I'm not going to say "die" yet. Where is it ? Ah-h !'

His face grew long, and he whistled, as he saw the great crimson stain upon the khaki which covered the heaving breast of the man over whom he was bending. He was lying half-turned upon his side, with an elbow upon the ground, so that the wound at first had not been visible. Now, however, Meredith saw plainly by the blood-stained grass, which grew ever redder, and by the deadly pallor of the face, that his comrade was bleeding to death. He did what he could to stanch the flow ; but it was with ever-increasing misgivings ; and every touch caused such terrible suffering that he was forced at last to desist.

'Ay, ay, let me alone, that's a good fellow,' pleaded the wounded man. 'I can bear no more. Besides, as I tell you, I'm done for ; so where's the use ? You couldn't get me a drop of water, I suppose ?'

There was a wistful longing in the failing eyes of the poor fellow, as he made this request, which went to the heart of his comrade. Such a simple request and so full of pathos ; none the less pathetic to-day than it was when

David made it, long ago, in the valley of Rephaim, despite the thousands of times it has been repeated since. And yet, though so simple, how very hard of attainment did it seem on the sun-baked, waterless veldt.

Meredith's eyes ranged helplessly around, seeking the precious liquid which he had little hope of finding.

He was thirsty enough himself. But, to do him justice, it was not of his own thirst he thought at that moment, any more than of his own pain. Though not more unselfish than the majority of his kind, the realisation that this comrade of his was in infinitely worse case than himself had, for the moment, lifted him out of himself and made him unmindful of his own particular needs. Or, if he remembered them at all, it was only to bethink himself that it was long since the troop to which he belonged had passed the last spruit, and that when, some time ago, he had wanted a drink he had been unable to satisfy his desire by reason of an empty water-bottle.

Most likely those other water-bottles, which were slung from the shoulders of the many dead who lay around, were empty too.

Well, he could but look.

Slowly and painfully he dragged himself from body to body—those piteous, pain-filled eyes following him all the time. It was only to find that he had been right in his surmise.

Ah, here was a dead Boer ! On him, perhaps, might be found the coveted draught, which was lacking among the British. Yes, here was water at last, thank God ! Poor Calvert should at least not be balked of his last desire, if die he must.

Armed with the precious bottle, Meredith crept back to his comrade, and, tenderly raising his head, guided the flask to his parched lips. The man drank eagerly, never stopping

till the last drop was drained. Then he sank back with a sigh of relief.

‘Ah, that was good! I never thought water could taste so nice. We didn’t think much of it at Kimberley, did we? Thanks, thanks! You’ve done me one good turn, old chap. Will you do me another?’

‘That I will! What is it, Calvert?’

‘It’s the diamonds I was thinking of.’ The man’s voice was stronger. The water seemed to have revived him wonderfully. ‘The diamonds we buried—you know where—before we joined the troop. I got together a good lot, before you came, old fellow, and I shouldn’t like them to be lost. They took a bit of winning. I should like you——’

He paused a moment, interrupted by a sudden stab of pain; and Meredith listened for what was to come next with quickened interest. For a moment he fancied, not unnaturally, that his comrade was going to bequeath his store to him, a bequest which would have been far from unwelcome, seeing that his own earnings were slender beside those of his friend. It cost him a momentary pang, therefore, when the wounded man went on: ‘I should like you to take charge of the lot, and realise for the benefit of my son. I never told you that I had one—no? nor yet that he and his mother are living? You don’t even know who I am. My name’s not Calvert, it’s Clavering. I got into a mess—gambling and racing debts—shouldn’t have been here else. I hardly know how I stand, or what hold the law might have on me and what I’ve made out here, supposing I went back to England—which I never shall now!’ He sighed, a painful, catching sigh. ‘That’s one of the reasons why I want to leave all in your hands. Those blackguards, my debtors, might take it from the boy, maybe—who knows?—I’m no lawyer—if he got it now. Besides, if he had money, he’d, maybe, go the way his

father went. Better to be poor and honest till he learns to hold his own. We've been good comrades, Meredith, these two years ; so I trust the young chap's interests to your care. Use the money as you think fit. Give it to him when you think the time is come. Say nothing about it, meantime. I've made a sort of will—it's not signed, however. Feel in my breast pocket—you've got it ? That's right ! It's got all the names and addresses set down. Now you'd better take that horse of mine, and make for the nearest camp—no use waiting here. I'm done for, I tell you. It'll soon be over. There, go, that's a good fellow !'

'You couldn't sign the will ?' asked Meredith, looking doubtfully at the informal document—a mere half-sheet of note-paper—which he held in his hand. 'It's not legal, you know, without your signature.'

'I know ! I know !' said the wounded man impatiently. 'I ought to have done it, but I put it off, and now it's too late. No pen—no ink. I can't even see. No, I leave it all to you. It'll be all right.'

'But if your son dies—what then ? Who's the next heir ?' insisted the other.

'The next heir ? My cousin Gilbert—worse luck ! I never could stand that fellow. The idea of his coming into Hatherlea, and getting my hard-earned money, would be enough to make me turn in my grave. I'd a deal rather you——'

He broke off with a groan. In his vehemence he had displaced the roughly-fastened handkerchief with which his comrade had sought to bandage his wound. The blood gushed out afresh.

A deadly pallor came over the face of the wounded man. The sweat, like dew on a cold glass, broke out in drops upon his brow. His limp fingers feebly closed on the hand of his friend.

‘ Good-bye, old chap,’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘ I— you—— ’

The weak voice failed. The eyes glazed.

Meredith bent his ear to the white lips.

‘ Yes, old fellow,’ he said, ‘ what is it ? ’

But no answer came. Only the damp grasp of the strengthless fingers relaxed.

Meredith thought that he was gone.

He was loth to leave his friend. But, as Calvert had said, what was the use of staying with him ? It was but one more dead body left on that stricken field. And why should the living be sacrificed for the dead ? If he, Meredith, remained there much longer, he would lose his chance of escape. The Boers might return and despatch him ; or his bodily hurts and cravings get the better of the strength which still remained. Besides, there were the diamonds. No ; it would be folly to delay.

So, with a last regretful glance at his unconscious comrade, he made the best of his way to the horse, which was still grazing quietly near at hand ; and, with a mighty effort, he hauled himself into the saddle, and rode slowly away.

A head, which was not that of his comrade, raised itself from the dry grass behind the thorn-bush, and looked after Meredith as he went. But he passed out of sight, unaware that he was watched.

CHAPTER I

OVER THE HIGH-BACKED BRIDGE

ANT. Who art thou, and whence comest thou ?

MESSANGER. My Lord,

I am a messenger.

LONGFELLOW : *Judas Maccabæus.*

IT is a fair little world that is watered by that small, but important river, the Tyne.

We are not concerned with the river in the more sober stages of its later course, when it has become as placid and hum-drum as a fat matron of sixty odd years, whose active days are over, and whose only care is to move through life with as little exertion as possible. Nor yet with the stream in its babyhood, when it hardly merits the title of river at all, and does nothing but laugh and play in irresponsible lightness of heart. It is Tyne between these two extremes—the talkative, self-assertive, fascinating nymph, of the flashing brown eyes and dimpling smile, who gives her name to the hilly district of South Tynedale, with whom we are to make acquaintance. A fair little world, indeed, is this haunt of the charming water-nymph, a world whose swelling hill-tops are crowned, in high summer-time, with purple heather, while the bracken weaves a green mantle with which to clothe them from shoulder to foot. A world of copses of Nature's own planting, which fringe its many water-courses in glen and ghyll with hazel and alder and silvery birch. A land whose grass is never burnt for want of rain or moisture—for drought is hardly known

there ; and, when the showers are lacking, a morning mist is seldom absent wherewith to water the earth. A world of moods as many as those of a wilful maiden, that weeps and smiles, and glooms and glows, under sun and shower, and cloud and gleam, till you hardly know where you are, or which of those moods is the most becoming. Not that Tyne cannot look sombre as well. In winter, when the snow is drifting white across the livid blue of the bare hill-sides, no place can look more desolate. There are times, too, when the wind sweeps through the narrow glens, and sobs among the rushes ; when the clouds have covered the sun and the mists throw ragged wisps of vapour about the dark hill-tops. Then, indeed, the spirit of Melancholy herself seems to have made the place her own, so empty and 'whist' does it appear. But such phases as these belong mostly to the moorland regions, where the population is sparse, and do not, as a rule, disturb the more numerous dwellers who inhabit the haughs by the water-side.

The large village of Hatherlea Bridge—it calls itself 'a town,' though you would never think it, so countrified does it appear—which lies along the river-side, has always a comfortable and cheery look about it.

To pose as 'Melancholia' would not in any way suit the style of this snug and sturdy little colony of the North Countrie. Its houses, even down to the humblest cottage (if, indeed, Humility may be said to dwell there at all) have a saucy air of comfort and self-respect about them.

Most of them wash their faces, periodically, with the whitest of lime, and anoint their heads with such solid cement as to prevent the possibility of such a thing as a loose tile or slate, suggestive of a brain distraught, an uneasy conscience, or a heart not quite at leisure with itself. For they do not want to appear unto men to fast, or any such-

like sitting in the dust. Far from it. The good folks of Hatherlea Bridge have always plenty to eat, and no scruples about eating it either—in Lent or out. Indeed, Hatherlea knows but little of self-denial or asceticism. How should it, under the comfortable doctrine dispensed, Sunday by Sunday, by Canon Hesketh, from the pulpit of its fine old church?

If you want to hear any such disturbing teaching you must go and sit with the 'Pit-Geordies' of Lavingham, some ten miles further down the river. For nobody wants it at Hatherlea, where neither saints nor sinners abide, the inhabitants being in that intermediate state which constitutes a landing between the two—more comfortable than the stair-head, safer and more respectable than the foot, and, therefore, far more popular. Even those buildings of the little town which are grey instead of white, such as the Church, the Hall, and the Rectory, have a satisfied and settled air about them, eminently well-liking. The jack-daws keep the church from regretting its congregation during the week; while, at the rectory, there are drawing-room meetings, clerical gatherings, and bazaars sufficient to make up for any lack of services at the church. The Hall, indeed, has the air of a man who is struggling with trouble; and, as such, sets a poor example to the smiling village. True, it turns as brave a face as possible to the outside world; but, nevertheless, it is not difficult to see that all is not sunshine there. The fine old Elizabethan house, with its gables, its twisted chimneys, and stone mullions, though solid still, has the air of fighting a battle against the times. The gardens alone, part of which have been let to a market-gardener, would be enough to betray this. For, as old Jobson, the gardener, is always complaining: 'What can yan man an' a laddie dae tor keep doon weeds?' Nevertheless, he does his best, and so does the old house, to keep up those appearances which are the life-blood of respect-

ability and self-respect. And when the Hall gets out of heart, it can always lift up its old eyes and look across the water at its friend 'in religion,' the eminently cheerful Rectory, whose shining windows never fail to beam upon it with smiling encouragement.

For the village of Hatherlea is cut in two by the river, the hall and railway station belonging to one section, the church and rectory to the other—a division of property calculated to prevent any possible jealousy between north and south. The 'bridge,' which, like a double-barrelled name, gives a dignified finish to the 'Hatherlea,' stands, a picturesque *trait d'union*, between the two divisions, arching its grey back like a mettlesome steed which has its doubts about crossing the water. Though, for that matter, it has crossed it constantly, without scathe, these hundred years.

Perhaps it remembers the flood which, a century ago, washed it away, with half a score more bridges, and, like a scalded cat, fears cold water.

Across the bridge, one fine afternoon in June, came a solitary man. He came from the station, and, after calling at the Hall, had turned in the direction of the Rectory. He did not go across at once, however, but, on reaching the middle of the high-backed arch, he stopped, leaned on the parapet, and looked down upon the peat-stained water, chattering and laughing in the sunshine among its mossy stones.

His grey, loose-fitting tweed suit toned so well with the old stone bridge that, in a place less observant than Hatherlea, he might well have passed unnoticed. But Hatherlea is so wide-awake it spots a stranger at once, and 'the chap in grey' became, unconsciously, the central-point to which diverged several pairs of idle eyes from both sections of the village, whose owners, by the merest chance, had time to spare for the affairs of their neighbours. He quickly

formed the subject of conversation at the Clavering Arms, whence all the temperance meetings of Canon Hesketh, during the dozen years he had held the living, had not been able to banish the beer and whisky, so tenacious are north-countrymen of their rights and privileges.

'He's fremd,'¹ said a shepherd, without taking his pipe from his taciturn lips.

'Ay, he is that. He'll be frae t' Sooth, Ah' thinkin',' remarked another.

'Hoots, no ! Whore're yer e'en, mon ?' It was the Hatherlea tailor who said this. 'His claes wor nivvor cut this side the sea, nor yet in Jarmany ; they're nowther cheap enough or nasty enough for that, Ah tak' it. What d'ye say to t' Colonies ?'

'Mebbes he's frae Sooth Afriky. He seemed a bit weak-like, Ah thought, as he went by. And if he hezn't got a limp of his leg an' yan arm in a sling ! Ay, that's the ticket, lads ! We sud ha' gi'en him a cheer as he ganned by, by reets, if we had but kent a bit seaner.'

It was the landlord, who had a son in the Imperial Yeomanry, and was 'knowing' accordingly, who made this brilliant discovery.

'Canny, noo, Mr. Ridley !' put in the blacksmith, holding up a warning finger. 'Let's be sartin afore we commit worsels, sae to seay. We maunna be sick fuils as they made thorsels i' Lavingham when they hooray'd thorsels hoarse over a platelayer wi' a brokken yarm, who'd nivvor seen ony fire but that on't ingin, barrin' t' ingle-nuik.'

'Weel, he's a fine-luikin' chap, onyway,' said the landlord again, shading his long-sighted eyes to examine the man upon the bridge. 'He ought to be a sodger if he isn't. Tall, broad i' t' chest an' shouthors, as brown about t' feace as though he'd been as weel baked as wor Sarah's breed—

¹ Strange.

an' there's nae baker like hor, this side Newcassel—if Afriky hezn't dune that, Ah'm giggered! A fine yaller beard—they've scant time an' watter to shave doon by, wor Geordie says—grey e'en as keen as—as——'

'T' razor he hezn't used!' put in the barber, causing a general laugh.

'An' hands that's seen work,' added the blacksmith. 'Ah notished them as he went by. Rough as mine, an' t' finger-nails worn doon like ony pitman's. He's nae gentleman!'

'That's as it may be,' commented the landlord. 'Ah've kent gentlemen that nivvor feared work ony mair nor yorsel. An' Ah've kent them as ca'd thorsel's gentry an' hed hands like a laidy's, an' yet wor nae better born nor ye and me, Sam Teasdale.'

Sam snorted a little, for he considered himself as good as anybody in Hatherlea, gentry-born or not. But he said nothing, knowing that public opinion would be against him.

'Weel, he's out o' sight now,' concluded the landlord, taking his hand from his eyes and going indoors to draw beer for a fresh customer. 'He's gone Rectory-ways. Likely, he'll ken the Canon. A pint, Ah think ye said, sor?'

CHAPTER II

A MAIDEN OF OUR CENTURY

A maiden of our century.—
A daughter of our meadows.—TENNYSON.

O saw ye bonny Lesley,
As she gaed o'er the Border?
She's gaen, like Alexander,
To spread her conquests further.—BURNS.

THE Rectory garden was, on that particular afternoon, the scene of one of those gatherings for which it was so justly celebrated, in which religion and society, philanthropy and creature-comforts, were, like the sweets and acids in those other delightful compounds, the Rectory syllabubs, most successfully blended. For Lady Margaret Hesketh, the hostess, knew the inhabitants of her little world, and was well aware that, now-a-days, the charitable mouse-trap must be bated with something more spicy than mere benevolence to attract a sufficiency of victims.

True, that strange enthusiast, 'Father' Allison, as they called him, who ruled over the neighbouring parish of Lavingham, managed to draw quite a flow of pennies from the pockets of his parishioners, whenever he wanted them, by the mere force of pulpit persuasion. But, then, Lavingham is not Hatherlea, and what is potent enough for 'Pit-Geordies' would never suit the more fastidious palates or the 'select' flock over which Canon Hesketh was overseer. On the day in question the needs of the Zenana Mission, set forth by a female 'deputation,' one of whom was, to

give the meeting pungency, 'a real native,' composed the 'acids' in the religio-social gathering. The speaking, hymn-singing, and praying, all of a very mild order, had been duly gone through. The sad case of the heathen, who 'bowed down to wood and stone,' had been laid, with the apologies usual on such occasions, before the 'benevolent audience,' who had listened to the oft-told tale with hearts untouched, and faces becomingly composed, followed by a doling out of current coins, which would certainly have been of smaller value but for the fact that Canon Hesketh's daughter herself held the plate—an open one of rare china—at the door by which the meeting escaped into the open air; an arrangement which still further displayed the worldly wisdom of the Canon's wife.

The faces of the well-dressed crowd were no longer 'becomingly composed' when they left the shaded drawing-room, where the meeting had been held, and trooped out upon the lawn to meet the stare of the gay June sun. Sobriety had given place to smiles, and silence to the silvery chatter of a brook let loose from the restraints of an earthen dam. 'The ladies,' who, usually, so largely preponderate at such meetings, talked ten to the dozen to make up for lost time, and one or two of the handful of men—mostly in clerical coats and white ties—yawned undisguisedly, as they made their way to the bowling-green to ease their cramped limbs and strained attention by knocking about the balls. One of these, a layman in flannels, went so far as to break into a contemptuous laugh, when he and his companion, a curate of the athletic type, reached the green and were out of hearing of the rest.

'Hang it all, Wallace,' he said, in answer to some criticism of the speeches they had been undergoing, 'if ever you go in for this sort of *pot-pourri* when you're your own master, I'll have nothing more to do with you. If it's our

duty to convert the heathen—which I'm inclined to doubt, since, as it seems to me, they're mostly more religious, according to their lights, than the average Briton—why can't it be done without dressing up Duty as a doll, and pretending she's a dear little child that must be dandled and played with to please her fond mamma? They didn't do the business in that way in early days, I suspect, or there wouldn't have been so much food for the lions. Duty was made of flesh and blood in those times, not of sawdust and chiffons.'

'Hush, Clavering! That's rank heresy, you know,' was the half-shocked, half-amused, reply. 'And uttered in the gardens of Hatherlea Rectory too! What would happen if the Canon or Lady Margaret were to overhear you? Besides, you're countenancing the ceremonies by your attendance, which weakens the force of your testimony. Why did you come if you hold such opinions?'

The square, plain face of the testifier, which had worn an expression of scornful irony, suddenly changed. His eyes—they were small and nondescript in colour—shone with an inward light. His mouth, peculiar in shape, with a trick of smiling on one side, when it relaxed sufficiently to smile at all, softened. The whole face was, as it were, transformed. The curate followed the direction of his companion's eyes and nodded comprehendingly, as he listened to the absent answer.

'Why did I come? Well, I had a reason.'

The reason was sufficiently apparent. The figure of a girl had appeared in view, rounding the corner of the privet-hedge which shut in the bowling-green from the rest of the garden.

It was the young plate-bearer, who, having delivered over her takings to Canon Hesketh and the heads of the deputation, to be eagerly counted behind scenes before

figuring *en masse* in next day's 'Hexham Courant' had escaped into the more congenial air outside.

Evelyn Hesketh was the only daughter of the Canon's first wife, herself the only daughter of a 'penniless laird wi' a lang pedigree' from the other side of the Border.

She made a very pleasant picture to look upon, as she stood, in her white nansook gown with its green bows and ruffles of white lace, under the green archway formed by the privet-hedge.

Old-fashioned matrons, whose *beau-ideal* was the slim figure and slanting shoulders so much admired when the last century was young, were apt to look with doubtful eyes on Evelyn's ample chest and well-developed form, built on the noble lines of a perfectly healthy woman, made strong and supple by the active exercise which, fortunately for the future of the nation, has replaced the more passive pursuits of the last delicately-nurtured generation. There was nothing 'delicate' about Evelyn. Her hands, though beautiful in shape, were by no means small. Her shoulders, between which rose the firm white pillar of a neck round which her mother's necklaces refused to clasp, were broad and square as those of a healthy boy. She held herself as upright as a water-carrier, so much so that her measure of five-foot-six was popularly supposed to be considerably understated. Nor was the head and face which crowned this fairly proportioned figure, out of keeping with the rest.

Without in any way conforming to the recognised standard of beauty, Evelyn's face, with its creamy complexion and healthy bloom, gave to many people the impression that its owner was beautiful. Her features, without being regular, made, when taken together, a charming whole. If her chin was too square and her mouth too large, both were well-modelled; and her smile, when the

red lips parted to show the strong white teeth, gave you, like sudden sunshine, a feeling of pleasant warmth. If her nose was neither Grecian nor Roman, it was what is quite as good (heretical though it may be to say so), the best of British manufacture—an independent, slightly contemptuous, member, which is neither straight nor curved, but just the least little bit up-standing. A broad white brow, with tawny eyebrows (to match the masses of tawny hair, coiled at the back of the well-shaped head), roofed in a pair of innocent, smiling eyes, which were just one shade darker than the hair, and looked you straight in the face, as girls' eyes may, now-a-days, without the reproach of boldness. It was the fearless gaze of innocence and self-respect, which is far more delightful than the shy, down-drooping gaze, which often masks coquetry.

Evelyn held her hat in her hand, so that the sun brought out the tawny ripeness of her tints, till you thought of the downy-cheeked apricots upon the garden wall. For she feared neither freckles nor tan—rather courted them than otherwise—and loved to live in the sun, like the healthy creature that she was.

Nor, when she spoke, was her voice in any way out of harmony with her looks. It was as pleasant to the ear as was her appearance to the eye, a full, round contralto, as free from thinness and acidity as are the large pipes of a fine organ. It was rich and sweet and mellow, like all the rest of her, so that when once you heard her speak you wanted to hear her again, which cannot be said of every human organ by any manner of means.

No wonder Gilbert Clavering's face brightened and softened as it turned towards her, for she was just what the old saying expresses, 'A sicht for sair e'en.' You could not look upon her without feeling the better for it. No

wonder that, when she spoke, he should leave the balls and come forward, as though her voice were a lure, though she said nothing more important than : ' Will you come and have some tea ? It's waiting under the limes, and you know how unpleasant tea can be if you keep it " waiting on you," as they say hereabouts.'

' Of course we'll come. We wouldn't risk the tea's displeasure for the world, would we, Wallace ?—especially when we know who's the tea-maker,' he added, in a lower voice, as, the clergyman having gone on his way, he lingered with the girl for a moment under the green archway.

She opened her tawny eyes, and pursed up her red lips, as though she were going to whistle, though, in point of fact, she did no such thing.

' A compliment from *you*, Mr. Clavering !' she said. ' Who could have expected it ? What can the world be coming to ?'

A dusky red came up into the man's square face. But he laughed with apparent carelessness.

' They're not much in my line, Evelyn, I know that. I must have caught the trick from the deputation we've just been listening to. But—there, don't be in such a hurry ; I don't often get you alone ! The tea ? Oh, hang the tea ! And——'

' What ? And the tea-maker ?'

' Don't play with me, Evelyn, for heaven's sake ! Tell me—when will you listen seriously ?'

Though the girl laughed lightly, her colour deepened, like that of the ripening apricot upon a sunny wall to which we have likened her.

' Seriously ?' she repeated. ' Oh, I don't know—" this year, next year, sometime, never"—how can I tell ? Not now, at any rate. They're waiting for me to pour out tea. Come along !'

'Hang the tea !' he said again, adding a stronger expression ; for the girl had not waited to hear the repeated threat, but was already half-way across the lawn, her white dress shimmering in the sun, and her tawny hair gleaming like burnished copper as its beams struck full upon her unsheltered head.

Clavering stood for a moment longer under the archway, looking after her with a moody expression. He was just going to follow, when his attention was caught by the figure of a man, in grey tweeds, coming up the short gravelled drive which led from the village street to the front door of the Rectory. He had his arm in a sling, and limped slightly.

'Who's this, I wonder ?' thought Clavering, and then, like the landlord of the Clavering Arms, he jumped to a conclusion. 'A chap from the war, probably. Is he coming to beg, I wonder ? But, no ; he's too well-dressed. He might even be a gentleman—Don't know him, anyway,' he concluded, and moved across the lawn in the wake of Evelyn Hesketh.

But, before he reached her, the 'chap from the war' had stepped from the path on to the lawn, and, lifting his hat, had accosted the Canon's daughter.

Clavering saw the look of interest which came into the girl's bright face, and instantly resented it.

'Hang his impudence !' he said to himself. 'What does he mean by speaking to her ? But there, these fellows from South Africa think they may do anything, and all the girls encourage them.'

'Mrs. Clavering ?' he heard Evelyn say, as he came up with her and 'the fellow from South Africa.' 'Oh, yes, she's here. That lady in black, talking to my father—there to the left, under the middle lime-tree. You want to speak to her—a message did you say ? No bad news I hope.'

'If she hasn't heard it already, I fear it *is* bad news,' said the new-comer. 'My name's Meredith, and I've just come from South Africa. Mr. Cal—Clavering, I mean, was my comrade. Then you haven't heard?'

The man's bronzed face took on an expression of concern. He stroked his yellow beard with a gesture that betrayed embarrassment.

'I'd better have written before coming,' he said. 'But I thought the news—in fact the War-Office—but I forgot the circumstances.'

'Do you mean that he's dead?' asked Evelyn, the rich colour fading from her face. 'Oh, poor Mrs. Clavering!'

'Yes,' answered Meredith, simply. 'He was killed, poor fellow! I was with him at the time.'

'You were? You were in the fighting?' The girl's face flushed, and her eyes shone. 'And he—fell in battle against the Boers? Well, at all events, his end was glorious. Did you hear that, Gilbert?' She turned towards the square-faced man, addressing him in her excitement by his Christian name, a slip he was quick to note and to treasure up in his memory for after delectation.

'Your cousin's been killed in the war!' she went on. 'But what are we to do? We can't tell Mrs. Clavering straight off, with all these people about; it would be too great a shock.'

'He hasn't given her much cause to regret him,' muttered Gilbert Clavering, under his breath.

But the remark reached Evelyn's quick ears, and she frowned upon him.

'At any rate, he was her husband,' she said sternly, with all the quick, generous revolt of a young girl against what seems to her unworthy cynicism.

'It would be brutal to tell her he was dead without *some* little preparation!'

‘Of course it would!’ was the slightly irritated answer.

‘Better say nothing till your party’s over. Then you can go with her to the Hall and break it to her quietly.’

‘I’m glad you have the decency to see things as I do,’ was the low reply, and Evelyn’s tawny eyebrows relaxed a little from the pucker into which her frown had drawn them.

‘But we’re forgetting Mr. ——?’ she paused, with a questioning note in her mellow voice.

‘Meredith—Claude Meredith,’ said the stranger, filling in the gap.

‘Of Llanillian, Caernarvon?’ questioned Clavering, in a tone of supercilious doubt, which seemed to nettle the stranger; for, with the short answer:

‘No, I’ve no connection with Wales,’ he half turned his back on the speaker, and again addressed the girl.

‘Then you’ll tell her first?’ he said. ‘I’d better go now, hadn’t I, and call again later? Will you let me know when Mrs. Clavering can see me? I’ll be at the inn.’

‘Thank you. That will be best,’ she said. ‘But the Clavering Arms isn’t much of a place, I fear; you——’

‘Oh, never mind me, Miss Hesketh!’ he answered carelessly, with a glib use of the name, which, considering that it had not been used in his presence, struck Clavering as in doubtful taste. ‘How the deuce has the fellow discovered who Evelyn is?’ he wondered wrathfully.

‘It’ll do well enough for me. We’re used to roughing it out there.’

Meredith raised his hat again, displaying a head of thick, wavy hair, which almost rivalled Evelyn’s in colour and luxuriance, and limped away towards the gate leading to the village, leaving the other two looking after him, Evelyn with decided interest in her frank eyes, Clavering with frowning brows.

'He makes the most of his limp because he knows she's looking,' he thought contemptuously. 'And how he dragged in the "roughing it in South Africa!" I'm sick of South Africa and the fellows who've been to the wars!'

Then he said aloud, with sarcasm tingeing his tone—
'Who's keeping the tea waiting *now*, Miss Hesketh?'

The girl started, and turned to him with a quick laugh, and a flush which showed that his arrow had hit the mark.

'You're very thoughtful about the tea all of a sudden, aren't you, Mr. Clavering?' she said archly. 'But,' with a change to gravity again, 'this is serious news for poor Rose, isn't it? She always said he would come back some day.'

'Yes, to begin with. But, lately, she's said to me, more than once, that she thought he must be dead. I shouldn't wonder if this news is a relief. Who could go on crying for ever for a fellow like Frank? She can marry again now, if she wants to, at any rate.'

The girl stamped her foot, crushing the daisies under it with remorseless vehemence.

'Gilbert!' she cried in a low voice, which, notwithstanding its careful modulation, had in it the concentrated essence of intense indignation: 'How can you say such things? I *hate* you when you do!'

She turned her back upon him in her wrath, and walked quickly across the lawn in the direction of the limes, her white nansook gown brushing the daisies with angry emphasis behind her.

Gilbert Clavering watched them lower their heads, and raise them again with cheerful alertness when the stormy white skirt had passed.

'They're none the worse!' he muttered, his square

upper lip lifting its left corner in a crooked smile. 'They'd as lief have her foot on their necks as be passed by on the other side, I do believe ! And so would I. Better her hate than her indifference—if hate it is. But what's a girl's hate ? If she treats me no worse than she does the daisies I don't much mind. I'll win her yet. Now for the tea !'

CHAPTER III

THE MESSAGE OF DEATH

JUDAS. A herald speaks his errand,
With forehead unabashed. Thou art a spy.

LONGFELLOW : *Judas Maccabæus.*

It was six o'clock before the lawn at Hatherlea Rectory was finally cleared of its guests, leaving Canon and Lady Margaret Hesketh alone with their daughter. Evelyn had not been able to leave with her friend Mrs. Clavering, after all. For the latter had been offered a vacant seat in a carriage which was passing the Hall gates, and the girl had been compelled to put off her communication till she was able to follow.

'Well, *that's* well over !' said Lady Margaret, the stately-looking but portionless daughter of the Earl of Ballyhalbert, in the peerage of Ireland, with whom the Canon had replaced the other 'penniless lass wi' a lang pedigree,' who had been the first Mrs. Hesketh. And, though she brought him nothing but prestige, he thought himself lucky, and was mightily proud of his partner, who, in truth, made an admirable Canoness. For, as the Canon justly remarked to a familiar friend who had lamented her want of a portion—'A man can't have everything ; and if Lady Margaret has not the advantage of money she is equally free from certain disadvantages with which the majority of her countrywomen are incumbered. I need not say that I allude to Catholicism, and that Celtic levity which would have unfitted her

almost as seriously for the important position she has to fill as the wife of—er, a dignitary of the Anglican Church.’ And the Canon said sooth. For the Canoness was a Protestant of a type even more protesting than his own ; and, as for the genial humour of her nation, which, like a cork life-belt, keeps its possessor’s head above water in the worst of trouble’s floods, she was as innocent of it as a cow. In body, soul, and spirit, Lady Margaret Hesketh was as solid as the heaviest ecclesiastic could desire. She balanced the Canon admirably. What more, then, need be said ?

Having so described the Canoness, the Canon may be quickly dismissed. For he was the admirable makeweight of his admirable wife—as solid, as serious, and nearly as stately as herself. If he was a trifle less stately, by reason of his less aristocratic blood, he was, to balance the want, handsomer than his mate. Indeed, he was the very picture of an evangelical ecclesiastic, with the most beautiful of white beards, the rosiest of complexions ; and eyes, mouth, and nose which were obviously designed to be in harmony with that throne in some stately cathedral which his admirers declared he was destined to fill. He had, moreover, the most benevolent of expressions and the blindest of voices, so much so that the intolerance which he displayed towards those who differed from him in ‘views,’ and the acidity of his remarks concerning them, were apt to fall upon strangers with quite a shock, like the unexpected taste of vinegar in melted butter.

The vinegar, however, was, it may be noted, generally kept for a third person’s consumption. When the Canon addressed his antagonist direct the butter predominated. It was not till afterwards that the man who ventured to differ with him discovered the acid flavour of the remarks which had seemed so smooth.

‘And I am sure all has gone off admirably, my love,’ said the Canon, in answer to his wife’s remark. ‘You always do these things so perfectly. We had quite a good attendance, moreover—all the neighbouring clergy there, I think, but that fellow Allison. He had the impudence to tell me that, as it was St. Peter’s Day, the services at his church would prevent his attendance! Now what do you think of that?—and I his Rural Dean! These Ritualists are beyond everything. But I mean to stamp out the vermin within my jurisdiction before they spread further. Allison is the only culprit at present. I must treat him as I do the slugs who destroy my tender plants—so!’ The Canon set the heel of his shining boot viciously upon a poor specimen of the hated tribe, which was crossing the garden-walk with slow and slimy motion, and put an end to its earthly pilgrimage.

‘Oh, father, how can you!’ cried Evelyn. ‘I hate to see anything killed—even a slug!’

‘Your father is right,’ said the Canoness severely. ‘It is painful for him, I know, to hurt any living creature. But a horticulturist must think first of his flowers, and a shepherd of his flock. Slugs in the garden and wolves in the fold are not to be tolerated—no, not for an hour! But that reminds me—who was that man who called, a while ago? He was rather a fine-looking fellow.’

Whether it were the slugs or the wolves that reminded Lady Margaret of the ‘fine-looking fellow,’ she did not say; nor did her step-daughter ask her, though her red lips trembled with amusement as she mentally asked herself. The next moment, however, she had remembered Mrs. Clavering, and the smile died suddenly.

‘That reminds me,’ she answered quickly, ‘I ought to go at once to the Hall. Rose Clavering’s husband has

been killed in South Africa. That was a friend of his who brought the news.'

'Indeed?' returned the Canon severely. 'Then I hope he died repentant.'

'It's as well that he *is* dead, anyhow,' answered the Canoness. 'He was a disgrace to the family.'

Evelyn's face flushed. Her lips moved as though she were going to make an indignant protest. But she only said gravely :

'He's dead, at any rate. I must go and break it to poor Rose.'

'Yes. Go, my dear,' said her father blandly. 'And if you find that spiritual consolation is required, I will come and pour in the oil and wine. But I am of opinion that your news will cause no fresh wound. Frank Clavering did his best to kill his wife while he was alive. Come, my love.' He put his arm within the satin-sheathed member of his stately spouse, and drew her towards the house, while his daughter, looking but little like the messenger of death in her gala green and white, crossed the bridge over the Tyne on her painful errand.

The sun, a little lower in the sky than it had been when Meredith had crossed the high stone arch, still shone upon the river as brilliantly as ever, turning the water into rippling quicksilver. The swallows still hawked at the multitude of insects which skimmed the surface on gauzy wings, recking little, silly things, that their dance was doubly a Dance of Death between the birds above and the fishes beneath.

Upon the bank, an angler was carrying the war into the enemies' camp by causing a fly to catch a fish, his long rod and solid figure reflected, as in a looking-glass, by the clear brown water of the pool over which he bent.

On the opposite shore a group of cattle stood knee-deep in the flowing stream, which sang and chattered among the stones that here intruded upon its course. Others were grazing in the rich flat pastures between the river and the hills, rising, not far distant, in soft gradations of blue and purple till their foreheads rested against the stainless sky.

The blue smoke of the supper fires curled upwards in airy spirals from every chimney in the quaint grey and white town, while the full-foliaged trees which backed it looked like soft green pillows ready for it to fall asleep upon when supper should be ended, and night should have fallen like a curtain between heaven and earth. The rooks were coming home to the tall elms that screened the Hall, as Evelyn neared the wyvern-crested gateway leading into the park. They looked like a shower of jet black feathers, fluttering hither and thither against the sky, which held the light like a topaz, and would continue to hold it till the sun should have set and risen again.

'Caw-caw-caw ! Caw-caw !' The clangour of bird-voices, hardly sweet, yet soothing nevertheless, seemed not a jot out of harmony with the peace which was the key-note of Hatherlea Bridge on this midsummer's evening when Evelyn Hesketh carried her message of death to the old grey hall.

Claude Meredith, seated in the parlour window of the Clavering Arms, watched the white-gowned figure as it crossed the bridge, till it vanished from sight between the stone pillars of the Hall gates. Then, before his mind's eye, there arose another figure and another scene, both in such violent contrast with those he actually beheld, as to cause him to catch his breath and shiver, as the superstitious say a man does when someone is walking over the site of his future grave.

‘Good God!’ he said to himself, ‘I wish I could get poor Calvert’s face and that battle-field out of my mind! They’re like Banquo’s bloody ghost, they’re always coming between me and pleasant things. Even this quiet scene and that girl’s sweet face don’t succeed in laying them. No wonder, though, since this was the poor chap’s home. I wish I were through that interview with his widow! It’ll be plaguery awkward, as well as painful. Never was executor in a more uncomfortable position. By Jove, but that’s a fine girl! How her eyes shone when she spoke of the fighting and of poor Calvert’s death! But, I mustn’t forget—it’s Clavering, not Calvert. So that was Cousin Gilbert? Well, I don’t much wonder my poor mate disliked him—a sour-looking beggar, if ever there was one!’

He lighted a fresh cigar, and smoked it leisurely, with his feet outstretched on one of Mr. Ridley’s shiny horse-hair chairs, while he waited for a summons to the Hall. His full blue eyes watched sleepily the swallows’ flight, and his handsome, rather sensuous features were expressive of perfect repose, while the fragrant smoke curled upward to the grimy ceiling of the inn parlour. Yet, every now and then, had anyone watched him closely, they might have noticed a little quiver of the well-cut nostrils, and a sudden twitch of the shapely lips, which showed that, serene though the general complexion of the smoker’s meditations might be, they were not entirely unchequered. The shrewd observer might have hazarded a guess that the man was smoking to keep nervousness at bay. Nor would he have been mistaken.

When, after the lapse of half an hour, there came a sharp rap at the door, followed by the entrance of the landlord with a note, Claude Meredith started violently; then, to cover his start, said nonchalantly, as he took the

note : 'You've a heavy hand, landlord ; you'd make an excellent performer on the big drum. But there—I think I must have dropped asleep !'

He looked at the note, got up, flung the end of his cigar out of the window, and, with his hands in his pockets, strolled towards the Hall.

CHAPTER IV

HIS DISCONSOLATE WIDOW

Passions are likened best to floods and streams,
The shallow murmur, but the deep are dumb.

SIR W. RALEIGH.

DESPITE his not unnatural nervousness, Claude Meredith's eyes roved about with no lack of interest, as he went up the drive between the double rows of tall, rook-haunted elms, which led to the home of his dead friend.

The fine trees, the terraced garden, with its stone balustrades and clipped yews, and, lastly, the old grey Elizabethan house—all satisfied his sense of beauty, and that almost superstitious reverence for what is ancient which is, often, almost stronger in Colonials than in the sons of the Mother Country herself.

The golden glow of the summer's evening seemed to surround the place as with a halo, idealising every beauty and softening each decay. Yet, though Claude noted the former with admiration, he was not unobservant of the latter, and caught himself regravelling the drive, pruning the thickets of rhododendrons which flourished too luxuriantly under the elms, and lopping the redundant branches of the trees so as to let in more air, with the instinct of a man who has managed land in his day.

'It's a grand old place,' he thought. 'I wonder poor Calvert could leave it. Racing and gambling, he said. Who would have thought that steady-going fellow had been up to such larks! People with such possessions as this

shouldn't risk them by any such foolery ; it plays the very devil with property. But I'm a nice one to talk, ain't I ? A rolling-stone like me—rancher, Cape policeman, stockman, miner, soldier, and, now, executor to a will ! I wonder what I shall be at the finish ? By Jove, if I had a place like this, and—and a wife and kid, like Calvert, I'd settle for good and all. No more rolling for me. Poor old Calvert ! Was it the wife that unsettled him ? I wonder what she's like ? Well, here goes !'

He raised his hand and pulled the long iron bell-handle which hung by the open door, his heart beating somewhat faster than usual, and his lip twitching occasionally, as he waited for the summons to be attended to.

'I hope to G—— she won't put awkward questions !' he thought. 'It'll be the devil of a business to carry out that poor chap's last wishes ; they're so deuced queer. I'd almost rather face hysterics than questions, though I hate to see a woman cry. My goodness, what a fine old hall ! I never saw anything like it out of a picture. What it is to be a landed proprietor in the old country !'

From where he stood, Claude Meredith could, by craning his neck a little, catch a glimpse of a beautiful dim interior, with a black-oak staircase leading up and up into a faintly glorified atmosphere caused by the sunset glow streaming through stained-glass windows, rich with armorial bearings. But he had not to crane very long, for he had got no more than a glimpse before a grey-headed old manservant, whose very appearance was a reproof to vulgar curiosity, admitted the visitor to a full and unchallenged view of the glories at which he had been taking a peep on the sly. Meredith followed him gingerly across the polished floor of the dim hall, up the shallow steps of the ancient staircase and across a landing, which caused the unaccustomed colonial as many qualms lest his footsteps should slide on

its slippery surface as had the hall itself. He was thankful to find the more solid ground of a deerskin doormat safely under his soles, and to pause to recover his confidence, while the well-trained retainer gave a discreet knock, as different from the noisy tattoo of the landlord of the Clavering Arms as is the performance of a skilled drum-major to that of a village amateur.

'Come in!'—surely, it was the same mellow voice that answered, as he had heard on the lawn of the Rectory? Nor had his ears deceived him, for, the next instant, the servant ushered him into a small, tapestry-hung ante-room, and Evelyn Hesketh came forward to meet him. 'She wants to see you at once—she couldn't wait till to-morrow,' said the low, rich voice; and Meredith at once noticed the vibration in it which told that the speaker was deeply moved, though her manner was quiet enough.

'But be as little harrowing as you can, won't you?' she went on, raising her frank eyes to his face. 'She's been so upset by the news. She'll not be able to bear much more—to-night, at any rate.'

Meredith nodded silently. He had no reply ready, and, even if he had, Evelyn's swift turning away towards the further door would hardly have left him time for words.

He followed her silently across the thick carpet, which deadened the sound of their footsteps, and into another room.

It was a cheerful little apartment, furnished in modern style, with comfortable cushioned chairs, pretty cabinets and lots of little tables, on which lay scattered scores of curios and nicknacks of every sort. A round-turreted alcove filled the whole of one side, and through this streamed a flood of ruby light from the red ball of the setting sun, now sinking behind the trees. Indeed, the whole room, as Meredith noticed, had a rose-coloured complexion—

carpet, curtains, chintzes, all joining in a general blush. There was a bowl of roses on the largest table, and the scent of roses filled the air with almost oppressive fragrance.

At the further end of this rosy bower, herself the only object in the room that did not share in the prevailing tint, a woman lay prostrate upon the sofa. She was dressed in black, and her head was turned so that only the outline of one pale cheek was visible, as Meredith, looking almost as awkward as he felt, followed his guide into the dainty boudoir. A tiny figure it was, almost fragile in its proportions, so much so that, despite the black gown, you could not look at it without thinking of Dresden china.

At the slight sound made by the opening of the door the little woman sat up, pushed aside the silky brown hair which had fallen over her brow, with the gesture of a pettish child, and turned towards him a face of such transparent whiteness, and so delicately featured as to strengthen the Dresden impression in Meredith's masculine mind.

'Good heavens, she looks as though a touch would smash her to atoms ! Whatever shall I do with her ?' he thought, as she fixed him with a pair of velvet-brown eyes, swimming with tears, that seemed to reproach him with nameless cruelties.

'Poor little thing !' was the big colonist's next comment, as he watched the trembling of the rose-red lips, whose vivid colour showed in such contrast to the surrounding pallor as to be almost startling in its effect—'how could her husband have gone and left her ? I should never have thought it of Calvert—never.'

The big fellow felt his heart fill with pity, and a sort of vicarious remorse ; and he moved forward, as though treading on egg-shells, and took the chair beside the sofa to which Evelyn motioned him, and the fragile little hand which the widow extended towards him. He held it for a minute

between his great brown palms, and then dropped it, as though afraid he might crush it before he knew.

‘Tell me about him,’ breathed, rather than said, the little woman, and two tears fell from the brown eyes upon Meredith’s hands, to his intense embarrassment. He did not know what to do with them. To wipe them away or shake them off would have seemed rude and brutal. So he stared at them in almost ludicrous dismay, and grew so hot all over that it seemed to him as though they were burning him to the bone.

A sudden little sound, smothered as soon as uttered, made him look up to where, a moment before, Evelyn Hesketh had been standing on the other side of the couch. But the girl had turned away, and was looking out of the window, as though to leave him, in a measure, alone with Mrs. Clavering.

Had not the idea seemed, under the circumstances, utterly impossible, Meredith could have sworn that she had smothered a laugh. But of course he was mistaken.

‘Did he— did he suffer much, do you think?’ went on the plaintive voice. And Meredith, torn asunder by the fear of disobeying orders and ‘harrowing’ the poor little widow, and a wish to gratify the appeal in those wistful eyes, floundered awkwardly over his reply.

‘Now, if you would rather be spared, Mrs.— Mrs. Clavering,’ he said with hesitation. ‘I am sure neither my poor friend nor I would wish to pain you.’

‘Does a wound like that hurt?’

‘Well, yes, I suppose it does—a little, you know,’ added Meredith, as he raised his eyes and caught Evelyn’s reproachful look. For the little widow had let her head fall back upon the cushions and looked ready to faint.

But, when Evelyn had bent over her with smelling-salts and entreaties that she would wait for further details till next morning, Mrs. Clavering sat up again with an

expression of as Spartan determination as her delicate features could be made to assume.

‘No, Evie,’ she said firmly. ‘I will hear everything now—*now*, I tell you. Do you think I could sleep if I did not know all that is to be known about my poor, poor Frank? Go on, please, Mr. Meredith. You were with him to the last, were you not? Did he seem to die happy?’

Meredith looked still more uncomfortable.

‘Well, upon my word, I can hardly tell you, Mrs. Clavering,’ he said desperately. ‘’Tisn’t very likely, is it? on a battlefield, you know, and— and away from his wife and—and all that. But, to tell you the truth, I wasn’t with him till quite the end. At least I’m not sure that he was actually dead when I rode away. He insisted on my going, you see. It was my only chance.’

Mrs. Clavering looked up quite sharply, the languor suddenly gone from her soft brown eyes.

‘Then you’re not sure that he’s dead, after all?’

If it had not seemed to Meredith that she was reproaching him with his desertion, her tone might have suggested a sudden fear.

‘Oh, yes, he’s dead, sure enough, more’s the pity!’ he answered hastily. ‘Do you think I would have left him if I’d thought there was the slightest hope? I’m not such a brute as that comes to. If he wasn’t quite dead at the moment, he was at the last gasp—quite unconscious, you know; that’s what I meant. I could have done him no good by staying; and it was touch and go for me. I was badly hit myself.’

He glanced at his wounded arm.

But Mrs. Clavering took no notice. She had sunk back on her cushions again with a long sigh.

‘Then you think I may order my widow’s mourning?’ she murmured plaintively. ‘My poor husband is really

dead? There can be no doubt about it? It's so awkward, you see, to wear the weeds,' she added apologetically, 'and then to find, like my friend Mrs. Cameron (you know who I mean—Evie?), that there has been a mistake.'

Meredith felt the thermometer of pity drop several degrees. The words struck him as heartless.

'You may order your mourning as soon as you like,' he answered bluntly, his embarrassment suddenly vanishing. 'There can be no doubt as to your husband's death; for I took the precaution to make inquiries as soon as I was out of hospital. So you can set your mind at ease.'

But, no sooner were the words out of Meredith's mouth than he repented of their brutality, for the poor little widow burst into tears.

'Oh, Frank, Frank!' she sobbed; 'poor Frank! To think that I shall see you no more! You're like the rest of them,' she went on, turning on Meredith with a gust of pettishness. 'Because he was—not quite all he should be, and left me alone with the boy, people think I don't care. But I *do*, I *do*! There's nobody understands me—nobody but Evie, and she's a girl, and doesn't know what love is. If it wasn't for little Bertie, I think my heart would have broken long ago! Did he leave no message or—anything for me and his little son? Surely, there must have been something?'

She sat up, with the same pathetic gesture of pushing back her hair which had so deeply touched her visitor before. But, this time, somehow, he felt it less, though his heart was still reproaching him.

'Forgive me, Mrs. Clavering,' he said gently. 'We colonials are apt to be a bit rough; we're not much used to ladies. If I've done my errand awkwardly and pained you more than I need, I'm very sorry. A message? Well, he spoke of you and his son—with his last breath, as I may

say ; and bade me see after you, and—and all that. I'm a sort of guardian to the boy—informally, that is.'

'Then he left no will ?'

There was again a sharpness in the inquiry which, but for the embarrassing nature of the question, would still further have cooled the listener. As it was he was too much occupied in choosing the words of his answer to have any attention to spare. He fidgetted with one of his large gold sleeve-links, unfastening and fastening it again before he said :

'There was nothing formal, Mrs. Clavering. My poor friend was like many another man ; he put those things off till it was too late. But he confided his wishes to me—we were great chums, you see—knowing that I would do my best to carry them out.'

'And that was all ? He left only *wishes* ? Poor Frank, I might have known that he would die in poverty !'

It was what the lawyers call 'a leading question,' and sufficiently embarrassing to Meredith. But, being indirect, he did the best he could under the circumstances, and gave it no direct answer.

'Poor old chap !' he said evasively, 'he was like myself and most colonials, a working-man.'

But the evasion was not sufficient for the little woman. With all her affectation and fragility she was no fool, as Meredith found to his cost.

'You will excuse me, Mr. Meredith,' she said firmly, though she put her hand to her forehead as though she were suffering acutely, so that, again, the colonial felt a brute. 'It is very painful for me to think of anything, just now, beyond my crushing sorrow. But I have my poor little boy to consider ; and—and we are very poor. It has been a hard struggle to bring him up, encumbered with debts as his father left us. Bertie is his father's heir. Is

there absolutely *no* money to come to him beyond the entailed estates ?'

She had effectually pinned her victim, this time. He could no longer beg the question. Nor, since it was put by a mother on behalf of her son, could Meredith find fault with the questioner.

He pulled himself together and answered, according to previous rehearsal, with apparent frankness :

'I am sorry to say my poor mate could leave nothing either to you or to his son—nothing, that is, that is available at present. There is a small sum in the Cape Town bank which he directed me to use for the boy's schooling ; and there are, I believe, some investments, which may yield something, some day. At present, I fear, you will gain nothing by his death, except—if you will allow me to say it—a friend. I was very fond of poor Calv—of your husband, I mean.'

The man's deep voice trembled with real feeling, and he held out his hand.

The widow took it with a sigh ; and, again, he felt the small soft palm, like egg-shell china, lie in his own, and did not dare to press it.

'You are very good, Mr. Meredith,' she said. 'I assure you we shall be glad of a friend—poor little Bertie and I. We are terribly alone in the world, though people are not unkind. You must let us see a great deal of you. There will be many things to settle, you know, as you are guardian to my son—informal though the appointment may be. You are staying at the inn ? It can't be very comfortable. You must stay here—as my husband's friend. Well, we will make arrangements later. I can think of nothing properly to-night. Thank you so much for coming !'

She lifted her small face to him with a smile so wan and so pathetic, that Meredith's masculine heart was melted

with pity. The widow had won him over to her side, for the time, at least, in spite of the momentary danger. When he left the room with Evelyn, he was an ardent partisan.

‘Poor thing !’ he said, with real sympathy in his voice—which was big like the rest of him—‘it’s very hard upon her.’

‘Isn’t it ?’ was the hearty answer ; and Evelyn looked at him with gratitude in her eyes. ‘I’m so glad you are properly sorry for her. She feels it dreadfully, I know, though people will not allow she can care for her husband. They didn’t always just hit it off when he was here, I believe, and his conduct in leaving her was horrid. But I’m sure she was fond of him, all the same.’

‘You knew him ?’

‘I only saw him once. We did not come to live here till after he left England. But, of course, I’ve heard plenty. The story is not to his credit, and you cannot wonder that I take the wife’s side ; she’s my friend.’

‘And her husband was mine,’ answered Meredith, with a smile at the girl’s reason for the faith which was in her. ‘He and I were together for nearly two years, and a nicer, quieter fellow never breathed. I cannot think that he can have been so much to blame as you think. It seems cruel conduct to leave that poor little wife. But there must have been some reason we don’t know of to account for it.’

‘People say there was a forgery,’ said Evelyn, sinking her voice as she spoke. ‘But, if he did anything of that sort, it never quite came out. It was hushed up after he disappeared—for his wife’s sake, perhaps, and the poor little boy’s.’

Meredith started slightly.

‘Ah !’ he said. Then, after a pause, ‘Yes ; *that* would account for it.’

Evelyn looked at him. The words were uttered under his breath, as if he were speaking to himself rather than to

her, and the man's rather full blue eyes were fixed, as though in thought, on something which was certainly not his present companion.

'Account for what?—For his leaving her?' she asked, with a puzzled wrinkle between her brows.

He started again at the sound of her voice, as though he had just remembered that she was there.

'Yes—for that and other things,' he said; adding hastily: 'Are you going home now? May I see you back to the Rectory?'

They were standing at the top of the broad flight of stone steps leading from the house into the park. The sun had set by now, and the tree-tops stood dusky against the pale gold sky. Under the thick shadow of their lower branches the avenue lay almost in darkness.

Evelyn broke into a little laugh of amusement.

'Oh, you needn't trouble to see me home!' she said. 'I'm not a bit afraid. Do you think us cowards, we English girls, Mr. Meredith?'

'No, I don't,' he retorted, looking at her well-balanced figure with honest admiration. 'You look as though you could take care of yourself, at all events. But, still, mayn't I? It's getting late.'

'Certainly, if you like. But you'll have to wait a moment while I say good-bye to Rose.'

He stuck his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the open door.

'I'm in no hurry,' he said bluntly.

Evelyn ran lightly upstairs, and opened the door of her friend's sitting-room. Mrs. Clavering was sitting upright on her sofa, busily twisting up her loosened hair.

'I've been thinking, Eve,' she said, speaking much more briskly as the girl came in, 'we must have him here to-morrow, and I'll write a note to Mr. Tinniswood to ask

him to come over and interview him. He might find out more than I can. Oh, don't be afraid ! I'll have the old aunts to stay while this African's here, to play propriety. You can go to Burnstones and arrange it for me, to-morrow morning. What, going already ?'

Evelyn had passed an arm round her friend's waist, and was bending down for a good-night kiss. There was a caressing protection in the manner of the younger woman towards the elder, which spoke volumes. Her voice was subdued to a tone of tender sympathy.

'Yes, I must go,' she said. 'Mr. Meredith is waiting for me ; he's going to see me home. Good-night, dear. I'm so very, very sorry for you.'

'I know you are, Evie, darling. Will you drive to Hexham with me, to-morrow afternoon, to see about my mourning ? It's three months since—since the death, but I shouldn't like to be seen without crape, at least, now I'm sure he's gone. I can write for the rest to Peter Robinson's. We'll have the close carriage, of course. It'll not be like a public appearance.' She added the last words in answer to the look of blankness she saw upon her companion's face.

But the girl's change of countenance had nothing to do with the question of close or open carriages.

'I'll go if you like. Good-night,' she said shortly, and went out of the room with a chilly feeling about her heart.

'If I had lost a husband I wonder if I should have any thoughts to spare for the crape ?' she reflected, as she went down stairs, no longer lightly, but with lingering feet. 'There are times when Rose upsets all my ideas ; I can't make her out at all. But of *course* she cares ; it's horrid of me to doubt it.'

Evelyn took herself to task for her momentary disloyalty, and the tears started to her eyes. To doubt was misery to

her honest heart. She had always stood up for Mrs. Clavering, and to find herself wavering, ever so little, seemed nothing short of treachery.

‘I’m a brute!’ she said to herself, with a force which should have stood for conviction. ‘Poor little thing, she’s beside herself with grief, and hardly knows what she’s talking about, that’s the truth.’

And, with a little gesture of the hand, as though she were putting something from her that lurked in the dusk of the old oak stair, the girl ran hastily down into the hall.

CHAPTER V

'WHAT SOME MEN CAST AWAY,' ETC.

An exile through the world, who bade thee roam?
None, but I wearied of a happy home.—ABP. TRENCH.

SHE gave a start, for all her boasted courage, as Meredith's big figure rose upright from its leaning position against the door. She had, momentarily, forgotten that he was waiting for her; and the shadows lurked so thickly in the hall that, not till he moved, did she see that he was still there.

But, though Evelyn Hesketh's nerves might sometimes play her false, to her infinite disgust, she seldom let their unwelcome treachery become apparent to any besides herself. Her scorn for girls who shriek was excessive.

'I'm afraid I've kept you longer than I meant, Mr. Meredith,' she said penitently, as they went, side by side, into the park, her white dress shimmering vaguely in the twilight beside the invisible grey of her companion. 'Mrs. Clavering had something to arrange with me. Poor little thing! I'm so very sorry for her. It's hard lines, isn't it? that a delicate little creature like that should have to bear such a lot of trouble. It hardly seems fair, does it? If these things could fall on strong shoulders—like mine, you know—it wouldn't be so bad. But a little, soft, fragile thing like Rose, who ought to be shielded from every wind—it *does* seem hard. I could kill her husband when I think of it!'

'The Boers have done that, for you, Miss Hesketh,' was the rather bitter answer. 'Please don't be too hard

upon poor Cal—Clavering. If he sinned he’s had to pay the price.’

‘Forgive me’—her tone had penitence in it—‘I forgot he was your friend. One does not like to hear one’s friends abused, does one? I like you the better for standing up for yours, especially as he can’t stand up for himself. I forgot, for the moment, that he was dead, or I wouldn’t have said it.’

‘I know you wouldn’t. “De mortuis,” et cetera. I forget my Latin. But, all the same, I can enter into your feelings about his widow. It *does* seem hard, indeed. I needn’t say that I’m ready to do all I can for her—if it were only for my mate’s sake. You believe that, don’t you?’

Meredith had stood still while he said the words. As he turned his face towards her the grave light fell full upon it from an opening in the trees, and Evelyn could not mistake the earnestness of the expression, any more than the emotion which his voice betrayed.

‘Yes, I believe it,’ she answered, with an earnestness that matched his own; and she put out her hand impulsively to meet the one he had extended towards her. ‘It is quite natural, isn’t it? Were not you his friend?’

‘And you are hers. So, you see, we are a sort of joint guardians to the widow and fatherless; are we not, Miss Hesketh?’

He still held her hand while he spoke, as though to clinch the compact; and the girl left it in his without the slightest self-consciousness. There was, indeed, a shade of humour mingling with the earnestness of his tone which freed it from any suspicion of the sentimental.

‘Yes,’ she answered, with a quick little laugh, ‘something of the sort, I suppose. I’m little Bertie’s godmother, and, as you are his guardian, we may call ourselves gossips. He’s the dearest little chap.’

‘At school?’

‘Yes ; but he’s coming back, next month, for the holidays. There—don’t come any further, Mr. Meredith. We’re just at the gate—and there’re no enemies in it, *here*, you know !’

She laughed, wished him good-night, and was gone, almost before he could return the salutation ; her white dress vanishing among the bushes of the Rectory garden ‘like a flash-light,’ as Meredith put it.

He would have liked to have lingered a while under the bee-haunted lime-trees, that overarched the white gate, with this, to him, novel specimen of the human species, a home-grown sample of the English girl ; but she gave him no opportunity. So, Mr. Ridley’s parlour, with its stiff horse-hair furniture and stuffy atmosphere, having no attractions for him, he went back to the bridge, lit a fresh cigar, and, leaning his arms on the parapet, smoked it leisurely, with his eyes, now on the light-filled sky, now on the water, which, alone amid the surrounding duskiness, reflected the glory, as a pure soul only can catch God’s light and give it back in this dark world of ours. But as Meredith’s eyes saw little of either the river or the sky, neither were his thoughts occupied by anything more transcendental. The surrounding coolness and sweetness of this English evening lulled his senses and pleased his susceptibilities, so long alternately baked and frozen by the extremes of the African climate ; and his meditations, if such they could be called, flowed pleasantly on, like the water under the bridge. He had a series of fleeting visions, that came and went with the smoke-wreaths of his cigar—visions of a home like that deserted by his unappreciative fellow-colonial, and of a wife—ay, why not a wife, some day, when he could better afford her ? For what is a home without one ?—but not just like poor Calvert’s. That Hesketh girl, now. What a wife *she* would make for anyone ! But,

then, the Canon and Canoness would want somebody richer than himself for their only daughter, he feared.

‘Why is it that some men cast away what others would sell their souls to possess?’ thought Meredith, as he tossed the end of his cigar into the river, and wandered back to his quarters, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the dusty road. ‘What a fool poor Calvert was! If I had been in his shoes, now——’ And so on, and so on.

He did not see how a little pit laddie, who had been casting envious eyes at the smoker from his station below the bridge, gave a sudden spring into the water after that wasted end of his cigar.

But the boy’s endeavours were in vain; he could not capture his desire. For the river bore it away out of reach of his eager fingers.

‘Drat it arl!’ cried the urchin, in utter vexation; ‘that chap’s daft, sure-ly! Gin Ah wor him Ah wadna chuck awa’ a good cigar, yon gait; Ah’d smoke’t reet oot. But there’s nowt sae queer as folks!’

CHAPTER VI

WORLDLY AND OTHER WORLDLY

MRS. FORD. What's the matter? How now!

MRS. PAGE. O Mistress Ford! what have you done? You're shamed, you're overthrown, you're undone for ever.

MRS. PAGE. Is there not a double excellency in this?

MRS. FORD. I know not which pleases me better.

SHAKESPEARE: *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

'Now, really, Maria! Well, no one can call me old-maidish in my ways, I'm sure. But I have *some* sense of order and fitness, not to mention decency, and I draw the line at *that*.'

The demonstrative, applied by the energetic pointing of a finger, denoted a singular stratification of dress; what should have been an invisible layer appearing above the visible. The demonstrator, a trimly-attired little lady, with but little appearance of age about her, though, in point of fact, she was a good way on in the sixties, held up a pair of delicate hands in dismay, and then dropped them again in despair at the answer from the demonstrated.

'Well, Teresa, and if I *have* made a slight mistake in my hurry, does it matter so *very* much? There's nobody here but you and I; and I can easily put it right, after breakfast, without anyone being the wiser. I didn't like to keep you waiting—you're particular about that, you know, as well as other things—so when I found I'd dressed without my F. P., I just slipped it over the rest, for the time. I was afraid to be without it, you see, though the weather

is fairly warm, and there wasn't time to take off my gown—I thought I *had* got it under my apron.'

'But you haven't. Yes, I see, Maria; you really are incorrigible. And here's someone coming—I heard the garden gate click. Do go into the other room and make yourself decent. If it should be a man! Oh, do be quick, and don't stand staring at yourself like that, as though you'd turned to a pillar of salt—or something.'

The little dark woman stamped her foot, opened the door of the adjoining room, and almost pushed her sister into it.

And Miss Williamson went humbly; for she was unusually conscious of having been guilty of an enormity. Her large fair face, under its rather untidy thatch of rapidly bleaching fair hair, was flushed, and her pale blue eyes, which usually looked absent from every-day concerns, had the startled expression of a person who has been rudely frightened back into a too vivid consciousness of the present. As a rule, though Miss Teresa was the active partner in the little establishment at Burnstones, Miss Williamson was quite aware of her birthright, and could maintain the position of seniority with sufficient dignity whenever she thought fit to assert herself. But self-assertion in such a garb as she then figured in was, as even she was forced to allow, quite impossible. So she effaced herself meekly till her error should be corrected, leaving her sister to receive the visitor. This was nobody more important than Evie Hesketh. 'Though it *might* have been, for all *you* knew,' as Miss Teresa afterwards told her repentant sister. They were earlier people at the Rectory than they were at Burnstones, on the principle—according to canon law—always strictly enforced—that 'A clergyman should set the copy-heads for all his parishioners to imitate'; and, though the Hesketh breakfast had been over half an hour ago, the

Williamson meal was but just beginning. For, in this matter, at least, Burnstones was less servilely imitative than, perhaps, the Canon would have approved of.

‘We’re not quite such busy people as you are, my dear,’ Miss Teresa remarked pleasantly, as her visitor came in. ‘So why should we begin the day too soon? If we breakfasted at eight, as you do, I, at least, should be yawning my head off before early dinner-time. And as for Maria, she stays out so late with those classes and meetings of hers that she’s always tired in the morning. Now sit down and have a cup of coffee with us, *do*. I hate to see people sitting out while I’m keeping the ball going—always did. What a pretty frock you’ve got on, my dear! Only blue linen, and made at home? Well, never mind. It’s sweetly pretty; and blue is certainly your colour. You look like a bluebell nodding in the breeze—you do indeed. No, don’t shake your head, my dear, it only helps to carry out the likeness.’

‘Come now, Miss Teresa,’ answered the girl, laughingly taking the coffee-cup from the hand of her feminine admirer. ‘You’re mocking at me. I, a bluebell—I, with my square figure, and yellow hair and eyes, to be likened to such a fragile bit of elegance as that! A dandelion would be more like it.’

‘And a very handsome flower, too, Evie, my dear. But you’re in blue, not yellow, you see, so *that* won’t do. But enough of such follies. You’ve come on business, I see it in your eyes. Come, out with it.’

‘Yes, I’ve brought you—— Oh, good morning, Miss Williamson, how do you do? I’ve brought you news and an invitation. You may have heard the first, for it came yesterday, just as the missionary party was breaking up. A friend of Mr. Clavering’s has come home from South Africa. He—Rose’s husband, I mean—has been killed in the war.’

'You don't say so !' exclaimed the sisters in a breath, like people in a chorus, with an effect of unanimity only to be produced by long and constant practice.

But the unison between Maria and Teresa Williamson was confined to such common exclamations as these. They avoided monotony by striking a different note, directly after the common chord.

'Maybe, on the whole, it's all for the best,' said Miss Teresa, rather sharply. 'A woman is better without a husband, as *I* think, if he's neither useful nor ornamental to her. Rose will be better off as a widow than married to a man who's lived thousands of miles away from her these many years back. It must be as bad as a comet with a tail—the half of it out of sight before the other half comes into view. Fancy never knowing whether your partner is alive or dead ! I'd a deal rather never be married at all than have a husband like that.'

'*Teresa !* Oh, my dear, how *can* you say such things !' cried the other sister in a shocked voice, and the tears sprang into her soft blue eyes. 'Poor Rose, poor thing ! Does she feel it very terribly, Evie, my love ? Ah, my dear, we unmarried women can never know how bad it feels to lose a husband !'

Teresa laughed a little bit tartly. It was said of her in Hatherlea that she had had what is called 'a disappointment' in her younger days.

'Well, that's true enough, Maria,' she said, 'we're spared *that* affliction, at any rate, and a good thing too ! When I think of what poor Rose has had to put up with, I'm inclined to thank my stars that I've kept single. Marriage, in nine cases out of ten, is most certainly a failure, whatever folks may say.'

'And yet, I think, there is a great deal to be said for it, Teresa ; and that, considering the way in which it is

spoken of in Scripture, you are wrong to run it down,' answered Miss Williamson with mild reproof. 'Don't heed what she says, Evie dear, for she doesn't mean it. I myself believe that every woman would be married if she could.'

'Oh, fie, Maria !' exclaimed the younger sister with a colour in her cheeks that might have been a blush. 'You asked me, just now, how could I say such things ? And that's what I should like to ask *you*. It's quite unmaidenly, the way you speak, especially before a young girl like Evie Hesketh. Every woman would marry if she could, indeed ! Well, I, for one, *wouldn't*. And, as for you, you've as good as told us that you never got the chance. I'd have kept *that* to myself, anyhow, if I'd been you.'

Into the elder sister's faded cheek there, also, crept a faint pink colour, which made her, for the moment, look far younger than her years. But, instead of answering, she got up and began to feed the birds outside the window with the crumbs upon her plate, an attention accepted by several of her particular friends among them, summer though it was.

'And, all this time, I've never given you Rose's invitation,' said Evie Hesketh, rising, also, from her chair, 'and now it's time to go. She wants you to stay at the Hall for a few days, while Mr. Meredith is there. Will you ?'

'Of course we will, if poor Rose wishes it,' answered Miss Williamson, tossing her last crumbs to a very fat robin with the most vivid of scarlet waistcoats.

'Of course we will, if ——' began Miss Teresa simultaneously. But there she stopped, and branched off upon a course of independent speech. 'You take things too much for granted, Maria,' she said. 'We'll do what we can to accommodate Rose, I'm sure. But there's dress to be thought of. We can't go in colours, of course. My best black silk will want altering, if I'm not to look like

last year's fashion-books. And, as for yours—why, didn't you have it cut into a petticoat a year ago? You *said* you would, and I'm sure if you didn't you could never appear in it again.'

'And why not, Teresa? I'm sure, with a little fresh lace, it'll do very well—and so will yours. I'm glad now I didn't make mine into a petticoat. As long as we're in black it's all that's necessary. Poor Rose's trouble should come before the fashions; and if she wants our company, we couldn't refuse her what comfort we can bring.'

'There you go, Maria! No more thought for appearances than a parrot in the moult! Why you *will* have that bird in here in such a disreputable condition, I can't think—unless it's to keep you in countenance; for your clothes always look as loose as Polly's feathers, don't they, Evie? Oh, well, if we *must* go we *must*. But not till we've had the dressmaker in to furbish us up a bit. Will you call at Nancy Kirsop's and tell her to come in, Evie? It's on your way to the Hall, you know. And you can tell Rose we'll come to-morrow afternoon—not a moment sooner; it'll take us all our time to be ready by then. What are you muttering about, Maria?—the lilies of the field? A pretty lily you looked, just now, with that red flan—Well, we won't say *what*. But I only wish you *would* consider these things a little more. The lilies are always well dressed.'

Miss Teresa drew up her own well-trimmed little figure, gave a touch to the lace at her throat, and rose to ring the bell.

Miss Williamson gave a little sigh, and swallowed down the remains of her coffee with haste, lest the maid should come in and find her still at her breakfast. As she did so, an ominous crack bespoke some damage to the inner machinery of her decidedly 'unconsidered' array. She

started nervously, and turned her head to see if her sister had caught the sound. Miss Teresa pricked up her ears.

‘What was that?’ she asked sharply. ‘Has Jane been spilling the matches? No, don’t get up, Maria. For goodness sake, sit still! We’ll look presently. Good-bye, Evie, my dear. Don’t forget the dressmaker.’

The little lady shut the door after the visitor; and then, coming back to her sister, said in an awful tone:

‘It’s a mercy you have me to look after you, Maria, or you’d be the talk of the whole village! There, hold on to your skirts as you go upstairs or you’ll be shedding that F.P. by the way. You really *are* a trial.’

Again the little lady shut the door, decidedly sharply, this time, behind the departing figure, and sat down at her davenport to do her accounts. But her thoughts seemed to wander, for she stopped adding, presently, and sat, biting the top of her pen.

‘She’s just too good to live in this troublesome world, poor dear, and that’s the truth!’ said Miss Teresa half-aloud. ‘But it wouldn’t do to tell her that, or she’d take even less trouble than she does to keep straight with it, I fear. Still, if religion and good works must always be dressed as they are in the person of Maria, preserve me from religion and good works!’

And ‘the worldly Miss Williamson,’ as she was popularly known in Hatherlea, in contradistinction to her ‘other-worldly’ sister, turned her attention, once more, to the butcher’s and baker’s bills.

CHAPTER VII

THE PROTECTION OF THE LAW

'Tis Signor Vottore, the advocate ;
I know him by his knock.

BEN JONSON : *The Fox*.

MRS. CLAVERING, looking 'a widow indeed' in deep crape trimmings and the regulation cap, collar, and cuffs, sat in her rose-tinted boudoir in consultation with her lawyer.

Mr. Tinniswood had none of the red-tape-and-parchment appearance about him which is usually considered as belonging to the typical man of law.

He was, to begin with, decidedly young, hardly more than thirty, as people said ; whereas, the family lawyer of novels and plays must never be under fifty. He was, moreover, good-looking, in the black and rosy style of binding which seldom graces a legal volume. You might, to pursue the metaphor, have called him a quarto *édition de luxe* ; for his neat figure was neither too large nor too small, was kept with the most scrupulous care, and got up regardless of cost. His clothes were of the finest and most glossy of cloths, fashionably cut and perfectly fitting. His linen was always snowy, and his ties most correct. He wore a diamond breast-pin of almost too exquisite a pattern, gold studs, and a handsome signet-ring on his white and well-cared-for hand. Altogether, he was, as some of his clients were wont to say, 'an ornament to his profession.'

'Well, my dear lady,' he was saying to Mrs. Clavering,

as he balanced an ivory paper-cutter on his trim fore-finger, 'I have done my best, but I can make no more of it than you have done already. Indeed, I could hardly press him further, as he seemed inclined to resent my questions. It *seems* to be all right, and one cannot go throwing doubts upon a gentleman's word. But I wish there'd been something to show—even a scrap of paper in your late husband's handwriting. The law doesn't like to take such things on trust.'

Mrs. Clavering sighed, and raised one little hand—it seemed of too small and delicate a make to be of any practical use in the world—to arrange the crape which covered the bodice of her gown.

'No,' she said plaintively, 'no; that's what I feel myself. But, as you say, what can one do? Luckily the place is entailed, and there are my settlements. Poor Frank knew that; and if he *really* had nothing personal to leave us, where was the use of a will? Still, Mr. Meredith *did* hint at a possible something.'

'Yes; and having said so much, it seems to me that he ought to explain. It's quite true that he may not know precisely the state of his friend's affairs; but he ought to find out. I think I'll write to that Bank at Cape Town and make some inquiries, on the quiet. What do you think, Mrs. Clavering?'

Mr. Tinniswood looked up into his client's face with a bland smile, as he made this appeal to her judgment.

'Don't ask me!' she sighed, in her little plaintive voice. 'I'm only a poor ignorant woman, and know nothing whatever of law. How should I? Do what you think best, Mr. Tinniswood. If he's deceiving me, I can't help it. It seems to me that my boy and I are altogether in his hands. But I hardly think that anyone would have the heart to take advantage of such helplessness as ours.'

The position of a widow is very pitiable, isn't it—when there isn't even the safeguard of a will ?'

There were tears in the large dark eyes that were raised to the lawyer's face.

Women like Mrs. Clavering are well aware of the eloquence of speaking eyes (especially when they can be made liquid) where a man of any sort is concerned. They said their say to Mr. Tinniswood ; for he ventured to lay his hand upon the little butterfly member which was resting near it on the table.

'My dear lady,' he said fervently, in a tone which, under the circumstances, was scarcely legal. 'I'm only too keenly aware of that. As you know, I'm devoted to your service—have been this long while ! It was only the doubt as to your freedom that kept me silent. If you would but give me the right to—to defend you——'

He would have captured the little hand, which already seemed more than half in his possession ; but Mrs. Clavering withdrew it hastily. She was better aware than was Mr. Tinniswood, man of law though he was, of what society considers lawful in the case of a new-made widow ; and she thought that matters had, for the present, gone far enough. A hand which had only just been freed by death from the grasp of one man, could not decently be surrendered all at once to the possession of another.

'Thank you,' she said rather primly, drawing up her little figure with a comical attempt at dignity, suggestive of a white bantam hen when a cock, which is not her mate, has ventured to look her way. 'I am sure you will protect my interests to the best of your ability. There's the luncheon bell ; I must go and get myself ready. You'll stay and lunch with us, Mr. Tinniswood, won't you ? Mr. Meredith and my aunts are with me, as you know ;

and Evie Hesketh is coming. Ah, there she is ; I must go and meet her.'

She fluttered out of the room, leaving her lawyer not altogether dissatisfied with his interview ; though, at the end of it, he held nothing more tangible than the paper-cutter. For lack of the hand he had taken up the ivory again, and was balancing it once more on his finger.

'It's four months ago, however,' he murmured meditatively, apparently addressing the knife, for his black eyes were fixed upon it. 'It's not as though he were just dead. But women are so particular ! I *think* it's all right, however. Just wants a little managing, and I'll land her, sure enough. Pretty woman, and charming place as a home during the long minority. And, if there's nothing more to come, her settlements are secure enough. The creditors can't touch them. Luncheon ? Oh, very well.'

He rose and followed the butler.

The party of six looked but a small population for the great dining-room at Hatherlea Hall, with its groined roof and walls hung with stamped leather and old family portraits. They occupied the window end of the long oak table, whence all but the hostess could look through the open casements on to the quaintly-cut beds and bushes of the Dutch garden, and enjoy the scent from the standard roses which was wafted into the room.

Evie Hesketh, looking, as Meredith thought, like a rose herself, with a cluster of *banksias* in the bosom of her pale pink muslin gown, and another in her Leghorn hat, sat beside the colonial, meeting him again with a frank pleasure that seemed to him very engaging. In her bright youth and light garments she stood out vividly from the sombre background of the old room, and from among her black-gowned older companions, so that no one, least of all a man already so much interested in her as was

Claude Meredith, could have helped regarding her as the central figure in the group.

'So you've flitted, as they say here, Mr. Meredith?' she said, as they sat down to the table. 'You don't know what that is? Changed your quarters, I mean—forsaken Mr. Ridley and the Clavering Arms for the more spacious hotel of Hatherlea Hall. Now confess that you are heart-broken at the change! A colonial like you must feel like a fish out of water in a ghostly old place like this.'

'But I *don't*; that's what's so queer about it, Miss Hesketh,' answered Meredith, turning to his companion almost with the confidence one shows to an old acquaintance among new ones. 'You'll hardly believe me, I dare say but I seem to have lived in a place like this during some former incarnation. I feel quite at home here. Old oak and stamped leather are ever so much more congenial to me than the bilious paper and mangy horse-hair of the Clavering Arms.'

'Ah, you've aristocratic tastes, I see, Mr. Meredith,' remarked the lawyer, looking across the table with a sarcastic smile, as he caught the remark. 'Gentlemen from the colonies often have; though where they get them from I can't think.'

Meredith reddened. The passage of arms which he had had, that morning, with Mr. Tinniswood had not prepossessed him in that gentleman's favour; and he resented his attempt to make general a conversation only intended for his neighbour.

'Do you know much about the colonies?' he asked, with a lifting of the eyebrows, which, to those who knew him, betokened that his weapon was coming out of its sheath.

'I said colonials, *not* the colonies,' retorted the lawyer, who was keen enough to have felt the sneer, and yet not

sufficiently on the alert to remember the letter as well as the spirit of his remark.

'Oh, did you?' was the careless rejoinder; and the speaker once more turned to his companion, with an anecdote about South Africa that made her laugh.

'We're not *all* Boers (with two o's) out there, you see!' he concluded.

'Poor Boers! I can't help feeling sorry for them,' sighed Miss Williamson, whose sympathies, like those of many tender-hearted women without much judgment, were nearly always on the side of the weaker party.

But her sister threw her small weight at once into the opposite scale, after the manner of most sisters of strong opinions, who, continuing to live with their nest-mates after middle life, consider it only their duty to keep the balance of authority even.

'Now, Maria,' she said reprovingly, 'haven't you yet recognised that your sympathies are misplaced? I thought you'd given in about that, when last we argued the subject out. Mr. Meredith knows all about it; he and I agree perfectly as to the rights and wrongs of the war. He'll tell you that your pity is thrown away.'

Meredith, thus appealed to, looked up. This new attempt to draw him away from particular to general conversation irritated him, and disposed him unkindly towards the spinsters. For, not only was his neighbour 'metal more attractive' to him than any at the table, but, like many men whose lines have been cast in solitary places, he understood but poorly the art of making himself agreeable to more than one person at a time—and a person, moreover, who must in return be agreeable to him. His reply was, therefore, calculated to act as an extinguisher to poor Miss Teresa.

'Really,' he said, with undisguised sarcasm, 'it's a subject

I haven't considered. I've always looked on politics, especially South African politics, as a decided bore, and a bore's even worse than a Boer, to my thinking. Don't you agree with me, Miss Hesketh ?'

He turned away from Miss Teresa and back to Evie in a way that was hardly polite.

The girl blushed ; the slight to her old friend, though made in her own favour, was not to her mind. She administered promptly a rap on the knuckles in return.

'I thought you said you were not all Boers (with two o's) out there, Mr. Meredith. I'm afraid you're hardly a judge.'

Meredith looked at her in surprise.

'What has that got to do with it ?' he asked quickly.

'Isn't it rather a mark of one to call a lady a bore to her face ?' she asked, after making sure that Miss Teresa was not listening.

Meredith lifted his eyebrows, and flushed a little under his tan.

'You know how to punish a fellow, Miss Hesketh,' he said. 'Your steel is out in a moment. But you mustn't be hard on me. Remember it's a rough life we lead out there, and if my manners need mending, as I'm afraid they do, you must give me a helping hand. You will, won't you ?' he pleaded, bending a little towards her, 'you were my first friend over here, don't go and turn enemy.'

Evie laughed, and her face relaxed from its attempt at sternness and became its sunny self again. The man's evident wish to stand well with her and to bend to her sway was not to be resisted.

'Oh, well, I'll do what I can,' she said, gaily. 'But you must treat my friends properly if you want me to stand in that capacity to you ; and the Miss Williamsons are my particular friends. Your first exercise shall be to

go and talk South Africa to them for ten minutes, directly lunch is over.'

'Make it five, and I obey,' returned Meredith, briskly, falling in with his companion's humour.

'Oh, very well—five, to begin with,' she said. 'But, remember, I shall be listening, so as to correct you afterwards. Rose'—she turned to Mrs. Clavering—'do you want anything in Hexham, this afternoon? I'm going to drive the pony-cart there for some household shopping.'

'I'll go with you, Evelyn, if you'll take me,' said Miss Williamson, before her niece had time to reply. 'I want to see Tom Watson's grandmother about him; he's getting into mischief since he came to the Bog Farm, I'm afraid.'

'Come, by all means, Miss Williamson,' answered the girl, with a smile across the table at her old friend.

'Will you take me too? I want some tobacco,' asked Meredith boldly.

'Well, we might manage it, if you're good, and will walk up the hills. But you're rather a big addition to Peggy's load,' said Peggy's mistress, with a critical glance at the colonial's solid proportions. 'What did you say, Rose? Some silk to match? You'll give me the pattern, then.'

'Yes. Come into my room and I'll show you,' answered Mrs. Clavering, in the voice which always reminded Meredith of the mourning dove that sings its most cheerful songs to the tune of a *Miserere*.

The two women disappeared together, but not before Meredith had caught Evelyn Hesketh's eye, as he crossed the room to join the Miss Williamsons. He was not of those who are inclined to do their good deeds in secret and so risk the chance of their reward amongst men.

He was still busily discoursing on the prescribed topic to the two spinsters when his task-mistress returned, and

she nodded brightly to him as she saw how well both ladies seemed to be amused.

'Why, Miss Maria, dear,' she said, holding up a fore-finger and shaking it playfully at her old friend, 'what-ever have you been about—no bonnet on yet? I'm going across to the Rectory to bring round Peggy and the cart. You've only five minutes to get ready.'

'Only five minutes?' cried Miss Williamson in dismay. 'My dear, who would have thought it! But you must excuse me, Mr. Meredith has been telling us so many interesting things about the war that I completely forgot how the time was passing. Didn't you, Teresa?'

'I didn't need to remember, Maria,' answered the younger sister. 'I'm not going to Hexham. Do go on, Mr. Meredith. We've still that five minutes, while my sister puts on her bonnet and Evelyn goes for the cart.'

But Meredith had fulfilled his appointed task, and had no mind to go on a minute beyond the time.

'Excuse me, Miss Williamson,' he said, with a glance at Evelyn, and in a tone of studied politeness; 'but you see I'm to be of the Hexham party, and must go and get ready.' And, with a bow to the old lady, he left the room in the wake of the young one.

'The other five minutes are mine, Miss Hesketh,' he said, 'mine to do what I like with. That was the bargain—wasn't it? Let me go with you to fetch the pony-cart. That shall be my reward.'

Evelyn laughed.

'Well, if you put it like that,' she said gaily. 'Though where the bargain comes in I don't quite know. However, if it's any reward to open the gates for Peggy you are welcome to have it. Come along; she doesn't like waiting, and she must have stood quite five minutes by now at the Rectory door.'

CHAPTER VIII

A WOUNDED SPIRIT

One, not easily jealous, but, being wrought, perplex'd in the extreme.

SHAKESPEARE : *Othello*.

It was market-day in Hexham.

The old grey town, so hoary, so solid, so sober-looking, on its hill overhanging the river, had wakened from its six days' dream of century ten to discover it was now in century twenty. It opened its sleepy eyes and stared down from the manifold windows in its weather-worn walls, with the blinking gaze of a fine old owl, that belongs to darkness and twilight, but has been, somehow, surprised by the day. Who were all these people that thronged the steep streets and chattered and bargained in the market-square between the venerable abbey on the one side and the veteran castle on the other ? They should, to match the antiquity of the place, have been monks and friars ; knights and men-at-arms ; gowned burghers and ruffed and farthingaled matrons and maids. How was it that they had suddenly donned coats and trousers, bonnets and hats, and gowns such as the town in its youth would have scorned to own ? Old Hexham blinked and wondered, as it felt the sunbeams creep, as of yore, over its high-pitched roofs, and stretch long, soft fingers between the shadows cast by its ancient houses, yet failed to decide whether it were living in yesterday, to-day, or to-morrow. The streets were the same, the sun was the same as it had always known. Only the people were different. For Hexham, like an old, old

man, lived chiefly in the past, and only wakened to the present on market-days, when the carts and carriages from the neighbouring country drove across the ancient bridge which spanned the Tyne, and climbed the one steep street, its only approach from the water-side.

Up this steep street, on the summer's afternoon which saw Peggy yoked to the Rectory cart at Hatherlea, there rode a man on a strong bay horse. He let his mount go slowly, its hoofs clambering noisily up the cobbled causeway, and striking out sparks that made the children, playing in the gutters to right and left, clap their hands and shout 'Eh, siesta !'

'It's Mr. Clavering from Brackenside,' remarked a woman, with bare arms crossed under her white apron, who was standing in a doorway chatting with a neighbour. 'He's a down-like man is Mr. Gilbert. Mr. Frank, now, he wor var a different—arlways a word for me as he passed by. Ah was sarvant at Hatherlea Harl afore Ah married, ye ken. But Mr. Gilbert, he nivvor even seems to see me.'

'Likely, he feels his position,' said the other gossip.

'It's a big come-doon for a Clavering to torn land-agent to a mon like Weston of Brackenside, whose faithor was nobbut a pitman. Claverings is well-come folks, eh, Mrs. Martin? An' pride breeds amang auld blood, like moths in lang kept woollens. It maun be a bitter morthfu', maun daily breed ta'en by a Clavering frae the hand of a pitman's bairn.'

'Ye may weel say sae, Mistress Wilson !' was the answer. 'Ye canna luik at Hatherlea Harl and not be wae for what it was and will be nae mair. Mr. Gilbert, canny mon, hez his troubles, nae doot. But wor hez wor's feelin's as weel ; and he might give us a word, whiles, and not be a pin the waur.'

The man, meantime, who had raised this discussion,

had ridden by, quite unconscious of being the observed of these two observers. His square, dark face was set as though the brain behind it were busied with thoughts far other than any which Hexham could suggest. The corrugated brow was even more ridged and furrowed than usual, and the keen grey eyes looked inward rather than outward. The blue beams of misty light struck upon horse and man, like arrow-shafts, from between the tall old houses, lighting now the glossy coat of the one, now the crisp, dark, hair of the other. But neither paid the least attention.

Clink, clank, went the horse's hoofs against the cobbles, and the bit and bridle jingled a soft accompaniment to the harsher sound. But the figure in the saddle might have been that of a statue, so immovable was it, so apparently deaf and blind to all surroundings.

Suddenly, from an upper window, just in the horse's track, a woman emptied a basin of water, with a splash, into the street, causing the bay to start and stumble. Then the statue came alive on the instant. There was a firm grip on the reins, and a deep voice said :

'Steady, Raider !' followed by some muttered words by no means complimentary to the housewife of the upper story.

After that the rider rode with greater circumspection till his horse had climbed the steep approach, and was up the hill on which the town is built. He clattered into the market-place, came to a halt before the Mitre Hotel, swung himself from his saddle, and gave his horse to the ostler. Passing through the lanes of stalls which intersected the market-place, their piles of carrots and cabbages, cherries and tomatoes giving a touch of vivid colour to the greyneess of the surrounding buildings, Gilbert Clavering turned into a side street, and rang at a door of eminently respectable

appearance. Its panels, painted in dark green, bore a bright brass plate with the inscription, 'Messrs. Armstrong & Tinniswood, Solicitors.' A clerk, with the usual pen behind his ear, admitted the caller, and the eminently respectable door closed behind him.

For half an hour it remained closed. No other caller, during all that time, came to awake the echoes of the quiet street with the ringing of the door-bell. The sparrows chirped and twittered in the roadway, bathing themselves in the dust without interruption, except once, from a passing errand boy, swinging a basket on his arm, from whose path they were almost too lazy to move.

Even when the brass-plated door again opened, and the caller descended the steps into the very midst of the feathered coterie, they merely dispersed for a moment, to meet again before his footsteps had ceased to waken the echoes of the sleepy street.

Yet Gilbert Clavering looked as though he would gladly have trampled them under foot. There was an expression almost of exasperation upon his dark face, as though he had just heard something which had not improved a temper already ruffled.

'What *could* Frank have been thinking of?' he muttered below his breath. 'Guardian to the boy, as well as sole confidant of his affairs! A fellow totally without credentials of any sort. It's preposterous! We mayn't have been the best of friends, Frank and I, for the last year or two before he left the country; but, at any rate, I was the natural guardian of his son, and he shouldn't have passed me over. Hello—look out there!'

The last words were shouted to the driver of a pony-cart, which suddenly dashed into the street from the market-place, nearly knocking down Gilbert, who, emboldened by the solitude, was walking in the middle of the roadway.

As he sprang aside on to the footpath, the cart pulled up with a jerk.

'Gilbert!' said a fresh girl's voice. 'It's *you*, is it? Sorry we made you jump. But it's *you* who should have looked out, isn't it? *We* were in our proper place, weren't we, Mr. Meredith?' And Evelyn Hesketh, who, with Miss Williamson and Claude Meredith, occupied the cart, appealed to the latter, who held the reins.

Meredith, his tanned face a little flushed with pleasant excitement, gave a smiling nod.

'Rather!' he said heartily. 'But still, perhaps, I was going a little too fast for these narrow streets. I'm not used to them, you see. However, there's no harm done, Mr. Clavering, is there?'

He nodded again—to Gilbert, this time. But Gilbert only scowled and muttered something about 'reckless driving,' and 'not having the pleasure of acquaintance.'

Evelyn seized on the latter phrase, and proceeded to introduce the two men. Whereupon Gilbert was obliged to raise his hat to the still smiling driver of the pony-cart, though he made his salutation of the slightest.

'We can't offer to give you a lift, I'm afraid,' said Evelyn pleasantly. 'Peggy could scarcely manage four on that hilly road, and you and Mr. Meredith are neither of you exactly feathers, whatever Miss Williamson and I may be.'

'Thanks.' Gilbert raised his hat again a trifle stiffly. 'I don't need a lift, I've got Raider.'

'So much the better for Peggy.' Evelyn opened her eyes at the tone and manner. 'Gilbert's in a bad humour,' she thought. 'What can have put him out, I wonder?' Then aloud: 'Well, good-bye, Mr. Clavering. Peggy doesn't like standing, and we've got a lot to do. By-the-by, will you meet us up at the Brackenside Camp, next

Wednesday? We're getting up a cycling party to ride there, and we want you to show it off to those of us who haven't seen it.'

'I'm not sure whether I shall be disengaged.'

'Oh, but you must! *Do* come; won't you?'

There was a pleading note in the voice that said the last words; and the gold-tinged eyes, looking out from beneath the long lashes, as though certain of a favourable reply, were irresistible to Gilbert Clavering.

'Well, I'll see what I can do,' he began. And the beginning seemed to be enough for Evelyn; for, without waiting to hear what was to follow, she nodded her thanks, and made a sign to Meredith to let the fidgetty pony go. The next moment they were rattling away again at a brisk trot down the quiet street, the girl's cheery voice and merry laughter and her companion's jovial rejoinders making a gay accompaniment to the clatter of the pony's feet.

Gilbert stood and watched them, the girl's face and the man's turned towards each other in evident good comradeship, the little pony going her own way without much regard from either; while quiet Miss Williamson sat placidly beside them, quite content to play the part of a silent No. 3, since Nos. 1 and 2 seemed all-sufficient for each other's company.

But, to the other spectator, no such contentment came. It argues the attainment of a very advanced standard in the school of unselfishness to be able to look on, quite without bitterness, while two people enjoy each other's society to the extent of forgetting your very existence. It is still more difficult to find yourself standing outside the charmed circle of happy intimacy, and see another boldly enter and usurp that position in the very midst, which, for years, you have been trying to take, by the side of the one person in the world on whom you have set your heart.

No wonder then that Gilbert Clavering's gloomy face grew darker, and his furrowed brow more frowning as he looked after the Hatherlea pony-cart. He stood there on the sun-baked pavement till it had turned the further corner, and the quiet street was left once more to the undisturbed possession of himself and the sparrows. Then he ground a piece of orange-peel, which happened to lie in his way, vindictively under the heel of his boot, kicking it, afterwards, across the roadway with unnecessary vigour, and sending the sparrows to right-about with shrill cries of remonstrance. A North-American Indian could not have treated the scalp of his enemy with more revengeful barbarity than did Gilbert Clavering that piece of orange-peel. And yet, as a rule, 'Weston's agent' bore the character of a 'vara quiet-like chap.'

'D—— the man !' he said half aloud (for there was nobody but the sparrows to hear him), as he turned his back on the street. 'What the d—— has brought him over here to cross my path at every turn ? And what can Evelyn see in him, I wonder ? It's just like the women to be caught by novelty and show ; but I thought better of *her*. Good God, if I'm to lose her, after all—and to *him* ! It's enough to send me slap down the hill again. But I can't believe it of Evelyn ; she's too good for such as he. Perhaps, after all, it's only her kindness to a stranger ! She *has* a kind heart, bless her ! though she's very cruel to me. Cruel ? Evelyn ? No, I don't think it's *that*. She doesn't know how she hurts me, sometimes, or she wouldn't do it, she who hates to see a mouse suffer ! Well, the thing won't bear looking at. I must put it away for the present, or business'll suffer, and then what will old Weston say ? Hello, Allison ! Is that you ? I thought you were in London.'

Clavering, his eyes turned inward on himself and his

trouble, had almost run against a tall, clean-shaven man, in clerical dress, who came up towards him as he re-entered the market-place. It was a thin face, with so little flesh upon it as to show the full anatomy of the rather singular configuration of cheeks, brow and chin, which looked straight into Clavering's as he spoke his name. The broad, high forehead, from which the grey-sprinkled hair was ebbing fast, like the foam-flecked tide from a great rock, was written all over with manifold lines. Yet, withal, it was very placid, as though the writing upon it were of yesterday rather than to-day ; and the passions and emotions—if such they were—which had so expressed themselves, had already burnt themselves out.

The large mouth above the massive chin was, at the same time, firm and mobile, the sensitive lips being compressed inwards towards the middle, while the corners were left full play. A peculiar mouth, as most people remarked ; but hardly less peculiar than the eyes, which were deeply set under overhanging brows, and which, fixed on a man or woman with an uneasy conscience, produced the effect of search-lights.

Gilbert Clavering, though he was unaware of cherishing any particular secret sin, just then, winced beneath their gaze before he had time to shut his own windows in the clergyman's face. He liked and respected Mr. Allison ; but, liking and respect notwithstanding, it is disagreeable to a Briton to live and move in a house whose windows are open to the public gaze, especially when he happens to be temporarily without his coat, as Gilbert had, metaphorically speaking, the sensation of being at that particular moment. He wished, with some covert irritation, that Allison would keep his eyes to himself. But he forgave him, the next moment, when the clergyman turned on him the singularly sweet smile of those, usually, tight-clasped lips. If a fellow

has search-lights for eyes, is it his fault if he, sometimes, uses them at unawares ? thought Clavering.

‘In London ? No ; I couldn’t get away,’ was Mr. Allison’s rejoinder, and the commonplace reply sounded almost like a Gregorian chant in his deep vibrating voice. For Mr. Allison’s voice, like everything else about him, was not as other men’s, and made, on those unaccustomed to it, a quite ecclesiastical impression, which its owner was far from intending. ‘Saint Gregory the Great,’ had been Allison’s nickname at Oriel ; and, though the man could be human enough on occasion, and was the last to play the part of a saint, it stuck to him. For, if you are turned out by mistake from a mediæval workshop into modern society, you must take the consequences. And the Rector of Lavingham had, certainly, been fashioned after the pattern of the monastic orders rather than cast in the smooth and featureless mould which produces the great majority of Anglican parsons at the present time. He was as different from them as are the figures on a hand-wrought metal screen, made by an artist of long ago, to the cast-iron imitations which hail from Birmingham. There were people who railed at him for posing as antique. But he did not deserve their raillery ; for to act up to the character which Nature has stamped us with is not posing. If it were, there are few of Nature’s productions among us who would not be guilty of posing. The truth is that the more modern and conventional you are at the present day, the more likely you are to escape the censure of the general public. There are still some, however, who declare that ‘the old is better.’

‘No ; I could not get away,’ went on ‘Father’ Allison, his search-lights turned full on the face of his companion, though his manner betrayed some absence of mind, hardly compatible with conscious observation of the person with whom he was speaking. ‘There was a bad accident

in one of our pits, the other day, as you may have heard, and the poor fellow didn't want me to leave him. He passed away this morning at dawn—rest his soul !’

‘But he was a drunken rascal, they tell me,’ returned Clavering, moving uneasily under the gaze of those steady grey eyes ; ‘and the accident was due to his own carelessness. You were so keen to be at this great Church meeting, when last I saw you, that I wonder you gave it up for a godless rascal like your pitman.’

A spark seemed to shoot out of Allison's peculiar eyes at the remark, and Clavering had the sensation of scorching. Yet the voice was very quiet that said : ‘You don't know what you are talking about. He was one of the flock.’

‘But a very black sheep, nevertheless. Yet you can hope for rest for the soul of a drunkard ?’ There was sarcasm mingled with some irritation in the question, and again Clavering fidgetted under the serious eyes of the priest.

‘Certainly ; for he showed himself truly penitent.’

‘Oh, well—*that's* all right !’ was the apparently careless rejoinder. But, having uttered it, Clavering did not immediately go on his way. He lingered for a moment with his eyes on the dusty pavement, flicking his riding breeches with the lash of his whip. Allison waited, thinking that he was going to say something more. But, finding he did not, he asked gravely : ‘Is anything the matter, Clavering ? You look troubled.’

At the words the man started into sudden alertness, like a dawdling horse that has felt the lash.

‘The matter ? Oh, no ! What makes you think so ? I was only wondering—— But there's five o'clock striking, and I'm due at the Vet's. Good-bye, Allison. I'm sorry you missed your visit to town.’

He was gone before the clergyman could reply, striding across the market-place with his head in the air, like a man

born at the top of the social scale. He was all on the spot now, at any rate. Yet Father Allison shook his head as he looked after Clavering with those searching eyes of his.

‘And yet there’s something wrong with him,’ he said to himself. ‘He’s had a wound of some sort, careful though he is to hide its existence. There’s a look in his face something like what there was in that of poor Harry Easton when they carried him crushed out of the pit. Man or animal, once seen there’s no mistaking it. I wonder what’s the matter?’

CHAPTER IX

A SERIOUS QUESTION

I would to God thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought. —SHAKESPEARE: 1 *Henry IV.*

“MEREDITH, HY. WATER, J.P., Denbighshire, Pentrebychan Hall, Wrexham.”

“Meredith, Baron; *vide* Athlumney.”

“Meredyth”—by the way, does he spell his name with an “i” or a “y,” Evelyn?

Lady Margaret Hesketh looked up from the pages of ‘The Englishman’s Bible’ which she was holding open on her black satin lap, and her long taper finger paused in its journey down the column of ‘M’s.’ Lady Margaret was quietly satisfied with the fingers with which Providence had endowed her. She considered them one of the many marks of ‘birth’ which she bore on her person. And such, undoubtedly, they were, though, as we all inherit our characteristics through our parents, Lady Margaret’s came to her, after all, from a source not out of the common. Like many among us, however, she liked to consider herself and her family as a peculiar people who had nothing in common with Tom, Dick and Harry; and though, in her case, good breeding and religion forbid any but the most modest blasts on the trumpet of pride, it is not in the nature of things, when you possess a score so well suited to that instrument, to refrain from an occasional tootle. If you do, how is the world to know that you are an accredited performer?

Lady Margaret was dressed for dinner—in her usual

black satin and family lace. So was her step-daughter. But Evelyn was not wearing her every-day frock, though only one guest was expected. She had, in fact, been longer than usual in dressing, that evening, and had found it unusually difficult to decide what she should put on. She had ended in donning a brand-new gown, simple, indeed, but of a style which is known to the dressmakers as 'elegant'—a cream-coloured affair of Japanese silk and lace, with touches of cornflower blue, which became her admirably. Though Evelyn was one of the least vain of damsels, she was not unconscious of being well-dressed and of looking her best, as she sat on the low seat of the open window, commanding the Rectory gate, pretending to look at the 'Daily Graphic,' which had just come in by the evening train, but with her eyes continually straying in the direction of the village.

At her step-mother's question she turned, rather absently, towards the questioner.

'Really, Madre, I don't know.' ('Madre' had been a compromise long ago between the 'mother' which the child obstinately refused to bestow on her father's new wife, and the 'Lady Margaret,' which would have been almost as impossible from the opposite point of view.) 'With an "i" I think; but I never asked him. Does it matter at all?'

'Matter? Of course it does! I should have thought you would have known that one letter can make all the difference between a man of good family and a mere nobody. You needn't laugh, child. I know what I am talking about, I can assure you. To take the commonest of all instances, there isn't a Smith existing who wouldn't spell his name with a "y" if he could. Not that Meredith with an "i" can be placed in the same category. It's a good enough name in either case—always supposing that

it's derived from a well-known stock. But there're some people, you know, who have not the least idea how they came by their name, or even whether they had a grandfather who bore it. I *hope* Mr. Meredith is not one of these ; though, really, now-a-days, there's so much carelessness in these matters that one cannot be too particular. It was rash of your father, my dear, to ask him to dinner until——'

'Until it was discovered whether he spelt himself with an "i" or a "y"?' struck in the girl, with some flippancy, completing Lady Margaret's sentence for her.

Her step-mother looked annoyed. The subject was a serious one in her eyes, and it displeased her to hear it lightly treated. Had the book on her knee been a real Bible, and the matter under discussion a text, she could hardly have been more shocked.

'Really, my dear, I wish you would be less heedless,' she said gravely. 'When there's a man in question a girl cannot be too careful, nor can those who have her welfare at heart.'

'What has that got to do with Mr. Meredith's name?' asked Evelyn rather defiantly. But her cheeks turned pink as she said it.

'I need hardly tell you, I think,' was the dignified answer. 'Before your father and I can encourage a stranger it behoves us to know who and what he is. Mr. Meredith is well-looking and agreeable, in spite of a certain lack of *cachet* ; which, however, one can overlook in a man who has lived most of his life in the colonies, if only one knows his pedigree. But that's the question, Evelyn. He isn't a Meredith of Llanillian, he told you that himself, as, also, that he had no connection with Wales ; so that the Merediths of Pentrebychan are beside the mark. If he spells his name with a "y" he *may* belong to the Irish

Meredyths. But I have my doubts. I wish we could find out. Your father——'

'Hush, Madre! Here's Mr. Meredith coming in at the gate. Do let me put that red book away. It would be horrid if he should guess we had been looking him up.'

Panting a little with impatience, Evelyn took the volume from her step-mother, and managed to replace it in the sliding book-case on the writing-table before Claude Meredith was announced.

Lady Margaret received him with a carefully calculated balance between cordiality and coldness. It would not do to be too cordial to a man whose antecedents were still under discussion, nor would it be judicious to give the cold shoulder to a possibly desirable candidate for her step-daughter's hand.

Lady Margaret was sincerely anxious to do her very best for her husband's only daughter. She knew what is commonly said of step-mothers, and she wished that, on the contrary, it should be said of her that she had been 'a real mother' to the girl.

That Evelyn and she were not quite sympathetic on all occasions, and were inclined to look on most matters from an opposite point of view, were reasons the more for circumspection. Lady Margaret knew in her heart that, should her step-daughter marry, she would not be sorry to miss her from the Rectory. But the marriage must be a suitable one, or her conscience, as well as popular opinion, would not allow her to indulge the feeling of satisfaction which she anticipated in having the Rectory and its master all to herself. She had not been blind to the mutual attraction between Evelyn and Claude Meredith; and, should he turn out to be respectably connected and reasonably well endowed, she thought that the match might pass muster. It would not be so brilliant as she could wish;

but, then, good matches are scarce, especially when a girl is but slenderly portioned, as was Evelyn, and without the dazzling beauty which can pick and choose. She had thought, at one time, that Gilbert Clavering was destined to take her step-daughter off her hands. His birth was irreproachable, the Claverings of Hatherlea being sufficiently ancient to please the most particular critic of pedigrees. And, though the family was not distinguished for virtue, having, in fact, rather a notorious character for wildness, yet, in the case of Gilbert, the wild oats were a crop of the past, and the soil which had borne them was now a pattern plot in moral agriculture. His only objection, in Lady Margaret's eyes, was his poverty. But, then, he was known to be careful of his expenditure, and, should he inherit the Hatherlea estates, which was not altogether improbable with but one young life between him and them, his present management of the property augured well for its future prosperity with himself as master. However, in our days, though the mothers may propose—to themselves, it is the daughters who dispose—of themselves. And, though Mr. Clavering had, with Lady Margaret's approval, and to her certain knowledge, laid himself and his fortunes more than once at the feet of the Canon's daughter, she had not yet been able to make up her mind to take what was offered her. This being the case, another string to her bow, could it be proved a sound one, was, in Lady Margaret's eyes, desirable. Hence the niceness of proportion in her reception of the colonial.

It was a little wasted on him, however. He merely shook hands with the step-mother, turning to the step-daughter with all the alacrity that politeness would permit of. And Evelyn, her fresh cheeks just a shade more rosy than usual, from the heat caused by the previous discussion, met his pleasant greeting, if not quite without embarrass-

ment, yet with cordiality accentuated by a desire to make up for the suspicions of the hostess.

'My father is so anxious to hear about your experiences in South Africa,' she said, as he sat down beside her on the window-seat. 'You must talk about nothing else, if you want to please him. He has followed the war with an interest as keen as I have.'

'You're all very warlike in England, Miss Hesketh,' was the smiling answer; 'but'—his face grew suddenly grave—'if you'd been through what I have you wouldn't find it quite so pleasant to talk of. There are times when I'd give anything to forget some of the horrors I've seen.'

He put out his hand and plucked a crimson leaf off the Virginian creeper which climbed up the window-frame. 'One might get used to it in time, I suppose,' he went on, holding the leaf in his fingers and looking at it closely. 'If I hadn't lost my mate and been so ill myself it would have made less impression on me, I dare say. But it was a perfect nightmare when I was down with fever in that hospital. There were days when I seemed to see everything as red as that leaf—as the veldt was, you know, after Colenso.' A little shudder ran through him, and the hand which tossed the leaf out of the window shook so that the missile missed its mark and fell back, a spot of crimson, on the girl's white dress.

Meredith picked it up hastily, with a look of horror, leaned forward and dropped it among the thick growth of its green fellows, where its premature decay was hidden from view.

'There, it's gone,' he said; 'let's talk of something else. You'll think me a fool, I dare say; but the very sight of crimson turns me sick. *Must* I talk South Africa to the Canon, at dinner-time?'

He asked the question with such a look of half-comical

beseechment that Evelyn, on whom his former words, coming from a man so strong of frame, had produced a feeling of astonishment, was more than half persuaded that he had spoken in jest.

'Yes, I am afraid you must,' she said. 'Father is keen on turning an eye-witness inside out, whenever he can get hold of one. He's as bad as any barrister, I tell him. But you needn't enter upon the horrors; it's the general management of the war he wants to get at—"the red badge of courage" can be kept in the background, if you prefer it. Though I'm sure you were well to the fore with it at the time, Mr. Meredith, whatever you may say.'

She added the words with a deprecating look, as though she were afraid she had hurt him. But Meredith only laughed.

'Oh, I don't know about that,' he said. 'I suspect, if the truth were known, the white feather might have been found in many of our hearts—like the word Calais, on that of Queen Mary—though of course we couldn't show it. But that doesn't mend matters—the concealment, I mean—does it?'

He looked at her with a look half whimsical, half anxious in his full blue eyes.

The girl gave him back look for look. There was no embarrassment now. Her clear eyes shone with wholly impersonal feeling as she answered, in a voice sufficiently low-pitched to escape the ears of her step-mother, who was reading the papers on the sofa:

'But I think it does. It makes *all* the difference, doesn't it? whether one yields to fear or not. It's the truest courage to go on in spite of qualms, to my mind.'

'Do you think so? Well, perhaps it is. It's comforting doctrine for fellows who are conscious of having felt the qualms, at any rate, Miss Hesketh—— Your father? Glad to make your acquaintance, sir.'

He stood up, with the colonial phrase upon his lips, and bowed to the white-bearded Canon. Then, on a sign from Lady Margaret, he offered her his arm, a little awkwardly, for he had thought to have led in the daughter, and, preceded by Evelyn and her father, they went into the dining-room.

The conversation, after all, did not flow in the expected channel, much to Meredith's relief. From the moment he entered the house it had been apparent to the practised eyes of wife and daughter that the Canon was in a fume—as great a fume, in fact, as he ever felt cooking within, short of actual boiling over and consequent fat in the fire. Till the soup was served he kept the matter heroically to himself. But, having taken half his portion, and pushed back his plate with an exclamation of: 'Burnt again; I wish you'd speak to the cook, Margaret!' He could not avoid the relief of letting off a little of the mental steam in the wake of the material. He had been to a clerical meeting in Hexham, which gave the cue to his family; though, to Meredith, his next words seemed utterly incomprehensible.

'Zedekiah was nothing to him, this afternoon; his horns were most aggressive, I assure you, Margaret. It's just as I said, he's trying how far he can push me; but, this time, it's a little too far. I shall write to the Bishop, this evening. He'll have to draw in those horns of his or have them broken.'

Lady Margaret turned to her neighbour.

'There's war, sometimes, in the clerical camp, as well as in the military,' she said, with her tempered smile. 'My husband is in command of this district—as Rural Dean, you know. And he has his mutineers. There's a certain Mr. Allison, of Lavingham, who leads the revolt——'

'And he deserves to be shot as a traitor—a traitor to our Protestant Church!' exclaimed the Canon, hotly.

‘That’s what you do to such gentry in South Africa, isn’t it, Meredith?’

‘What, shoot the clergy? I hope not, Canon,’ answered the colonial, bewildered by the rather mixed allusions to sentences ecclesiastical and military.

Evelyn laughed, not undisturbed, however, by the turn the conversation was taking. Having finished her education among the ‘girl-graduates’ of Oxford, her views on Church, as well as many other matters, were a good bow-shot in advance of her father’s; and though, being a dutiful daughter, she never insisted on overshooting him in his presence, yet, what must seem to strangers the narrowness of his range gave her, at times, a feeling of distress.

‘Ah, well,’ answered the Canon, his heat somewhat cooled by the literal way in which his remark had been taken by his hearer. ‘I was speaking metaphorically, you know. But rebels in the Church should be no more tolerated than rebels in the State, or mutineers in the Army, should they? What’s the use of Rural Deans if they’re not to keep order among the rank and file? It’s my plain duty to report the man.’

‘Who’s the offender, father dear?’ asked Evelyn, guessing the answer to the question she was evidently expected to put, yet willing to appear ignorant.

‘Why, that man Allison, of course!’

‘And his offence?’ asked Meredith, not greatly interested in the discussion, which, as he thought, must relate to some breach of the Clergy Discipline Act.

‘His offence?’ the Canon’s rosy face took a redder hue, and his blue eyes flashed fire. ‘Why, the man sets up a standard quite impossible for our country clergy to follow. Daily services, with or without congregations, it’s all one to him. Three on Sundays and Saints’ Days—*three*, I tell you, and in a place like Lavingham, where the people are

all pitmen ! What's the sense of that, I should like to know ? Several of his parishioners have complained to me that his bell is always going, and that they never have any peace and quiet. And when I spoke to him quietly, and told him how absurd it was to attempt what his brother clergy have found impossible, and so make himself obnoxious by pretending to be better than his neighbours, what do you think he said ? "The standard is not mine, Canon. I did not set it up, and it is not for me to lower it. I, also, am a man under authority." "Indeed you are," I said, "I am glad you have the grace to acknowledge that of your Rural Dean." "It wasn't *your* authority I meant, Mr. Rural Dean," he answered, with that provoking coolness of his, "but a higher authority, which, as I take it, you acknowledge as well as me—the authority of the Prayer-book." There's impudence for you, from a man to his superior officer ! The Prayer-book, indeed ! As if our religious liberty were to be controlled by the dead hand rather than by the living ! Did not Saint Paul himself say that all things are not expedient ? And is it expedient, I ask you, to dishearten and irritate your brethren by climbing a pillar and trying how high you can stand above their heads ?

'Saint Simon Stylites was never a saint, in *my* eyes,' remarked Lady Margaret, with an accent of authority which would have become a canonising Pope. "Whoso exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."

The colonial looked at his host and hostess in doubt as to whether their utterances were to be taken seriously, or as an attempt at wit of the ecclesiastical species. Being quite inexperienced in the pecking and plucking which goes on in the clerical rookery, he hastily decided on the more charitable view, and contributed the best addition he could manufacture on the spur of the moment.

‘That’s a hard saying for those whose heads are above the crowd, isn’t it?’ he said, glancing a little doubtfully across the table at Evelyn; ‘they’re sure to get them chopped off, like the poor aristocrats in the Reign of Terror. I’ve always observed that a man can be guilty of no greater sin than making a better thing of life than his neighbours; it makes the neighbours feel small, you see, and that’s so deucedly uncomfortable.’

Lady Margaret’s aristocratic features turned to stone, as much on account of the sentiment as of the unparliamentary adjective with which Meredith had weighted it.

‘You have totally misunderstood the Canon’s meaning,’ she said severely. ‘If superior goodness were Mr. Allison’s only offence, my husband would be the last to find fault. The man is in the secret service of Rome. A wolf in sheep’s clothing, if ever there was one!’

‘Indeed?’ interjected Meredith, more puzzled than ever, and wondering what there could have been in his words to make Evelyn send him that signal of warning, which was still more disconcerting than the sudden petrification of the Canoness. He pounced, at last, on his unfortunate adjective, though too late to do more than apologise.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said penitently. But, this time, it was the Canoness that misunderstood.

‘You may well grieve over the degeneracy of many of those in this Church of the Reformation,’ she said, in a slightly relaxed tone. ‘When it comes to the unblushing wearing of vestments, the open burning of candles, the secret teaching of transubstantiation, ay, and, worse than all, the public practice of private confession, you may guess what the Church of England is coming to!’

‘So bad as that?’ murmured Meredith, who, as Lady Margaret had rightly guessed, was totally ignorant of the merits of the case. ‘Is the man *really* a Roman Catholic?’

'I fear so !' sighed Lady Margaret.

'He calls himself a *Catholic*, at any rate,' snapped the Canon, whose sense of justice would not quite allow his wife's accusation to be received without a word of explanation. 'As to the "Roman," he can hardly be said to be that, my dear, while he continues to hold office in our Church. One must give even the Devil his due. But the manner in which he upheld Confession at the meeting to-day, appeared to me so very suspicious, that, as I say, I am determined to take the bull by the horns, and anticipate his secession by citing him before the Bishop and asking for his suspension.'

'Oh, father, surely you wouldn't do that ?' broke in Evelyn, with heightened colour ; 'such a good man as Mr. Allison ! And think of the work he's doing at Lavingham ; his influence on the pitmen has been simply wonderful.'

'My dear Evelyn ! It's not for you to try to deter your father from doing his duty, surely ?' remonstrated Lady Margaret. 'He may be a good man, morally, and yet exercise a most injurious influence by upsetting the faith of hundreds.'

'I shouldn't think the Lavingham pitmen had much to upset,' murmured Evelyn with a mutinous look, which Meredith thought utterly charming.

'I shall do my duty, whatever it may cost,' said the Canon, with the air of the man who is ready to go to the stake for conscience sake ; and he helped himself liberally to sherry, in temporary oblivion that, in view of a temperance address next day, he had taken the pledge for a week in order to plead example. Remembering just in time, he pushed back the glass with a wry face and the air of a man who has eaten sour grapes for the good of his weaker brethren.

'Ah,' he sighed, 'that reminds me. They say that he

dines off cold tea and yesterday's leg of mutton, when he invites the members of his flock. Such a parade of asceticism ! Why not pulse and cold water at once ?'

'And lives in carpetless rooms, with the commonest or furniture,' put in the Canoness ; 'grudging his unfortunate housekeeper the barest necessities to keep the establishment going——'

'That he may have the more to give to the poor, I suppose,' retorted Evelyn, with her head in the air.

'A man should consider his own household ; we've Scripture warrant for that, child,' said Lady Margaret. 'But it all comes of his views on the subject of a celibate priesthood, I suppose. What is a man without a wife ?'

'A singularly unhappy being,' answered the Canon gallantly, 'as I've reason to know. Still, you can't lay down the law for everybody in such matters. There was St. Paul ; you remember——'

'A great exception which only proves the rule,' answered the lady, with her air of decision ; and she made a sign to her daughter to intimate that, the last word having been said, as well as the last mouthful eaten, the feminine portion of the company might safely retreat with colours flying.

'You know how to carry the war into the enemy's camp, Lady Margaret,' said Meredith, with a bow, as he rose to open the door. 'It's a lost battle for us men from the moment you attack us as bachelors. I'm truly sorry for that Mr. Allison. He'll have to put himself under feminine direction, that's plain, if he isn't to prove a failure. What do you think, Miss Hesketh ?'

Evelyn laughed for reply, as she followed her stately step-mother through the doorway. As for Lady Margaret, she was not quite sure how to take the remarks of her guest, and wisely decided, under the circumstances, to receive them in silence.

CHAPTER X

ONLY A WOMAN, ONLY A ROSE

Of colour like the red rose on triumphant briar.

SHAKESPEARE : *2 Henry VI.*

‘WELL, and did you escape the cross-examination, Mr. Meredith?’ asked Evelyn, as the colonial joined her in that part of the Rectory garden known as ‘the Rose Walk,’ about half an hour later.

She had thrown a Shetland shawl round her shoulders, and was pacing up and down, looking at the sunset, according to her wont on fine summer evenings after dinner ; and the gleam of her white gown through the bushes had attracted Meredith’s eyes, as he sat with his host after the ladies had left them, and made the time seem long till he could escape from the dining-room.

‘Well, no. I’d have been here before now if it hadn’t been for that,’ answered the victim, with a wry face. ‘I wasn’t let off anything—not even the battles.’

‘I wish you’d tell me about them—just one, Mr. Meredith, the biggest you were in,’ pleaded the girl. ‘You don’t know how much I longed to go out myself when our men volunteered. I could have torn myself to pieces for being only a woman!’

‘Only a woman!’ the big colonial repeated the words in a tone and accompanied them by a look which made the girl’s heart beat a little faster.

‘It would have been a thousand pities if *you* had been a man.’

‘Why? But there, I don’t care to know,’ she added

hastily, with a feeling that they were stepping on dangerous ground. 'What I want to know is what it is like to be in a battle—your biggest.'

'Colenso. Do you really want to hear about that? It was awful, you know.'

'Tell me.'

So Meredith, overcoming his repugnance, plunged into the subject of that most terrible reverse, describing his experiences with a zest and vigour which surprised himself. For a pair of eager eyes were upon him all the time, which led him on and on; a pair of eager ears drank in his every word, and the colour went and came in the upturned face in a manner altogether fascinating to the narrator. Her lips trembled as he spoke of the surprise and capture of the guns, and when he came to the dash and heroism which saved the remnants of the battery the girl glowed and quivered with excitement.

'It must have been glorious—glorious!' she cried when he had finished.

'Glorious?' echoed Meredith. 'Why, it was nothing short of a defeat!'

'But it was glorious all the same.'

'How do you make out that? There is no glory in defeat that I can see. In point of fact, nearly all the engagements that I was in—after the first few, at any rate—*were* reverses. That's one of the reasons I'm chary of talking about them. One feels such a fraud—like a funky little beggar waving a bedraggled Union Jack, and shouting about nothing.'

'But if you are *not* a fraud, what does it matter? As long as a man has done his best, I think nothing of reverses. Why, nearly all our best commanders have had them, some time or other. They're a sort of training for victory. You set too high a value on outside show, Mr. Meredith.'

There was a light in her eyes as she said this, which did not wholly come from the golden glow of the dying west.

Meredith looked at her with more than admiration in his face. Here was a woman to incite a man to do his very best, he thought. A prize which any one might be proud to win. A wife to sell one's soul for.

To sell one's soul? He looked at her again, and wondered what *she* would think of such a transaction.

They had come to the end of the Rose Walk, and were standing with their faces towards the hills—great, dark, heather-clad hills—standing out, like ramparts, against the glorified sky. The girl stood still, looking over the low wall which divided the garden from some fields. Her figure was bathed in the radiant light which surrounded head and face as with an aureole. Her eyes had a far-off look.

For the moment she recalled to the colonist an angel in a picture by Perugino, painted on a golden background, which hung in the Rectory drawing-room—as calm, as strong, as radiant.

A woman to sell one's soul for? Was she so indeed? He could imagine the look in that light-bathed face if she were to find herself the price of such a bargain.

But, suddenly, she moved. The grave look vanished, and she turned to Meredith with a quick flush and a little laugh. The angel had flown away; the woman remained.

'This sort of thing makes one forget oneself a bit,' she said lightly. 'I said something very high-flown, just now, I'm afraid; let's come down to the ground again. I oughtn't to have taken you to task; but I forgot you were a stranger. You must forgive me.'

'Forgive you—for what?' Meredith came a little nearer, leaned his elbows upon the wall and looked into her

face. How wonderfully expressive it was, and how mobile ! The eyes were laughing now. The mouth was a shade defiant. She moved away from him by a few inches, and lifted her chin into the air—a round, soft chin, with a cleft in the centre like a peach. She looked very bewitching so. But, somehow, Meredith did not like her quite so well as he had done in her moments of sentiment. She seemed to have gone further from him, by a recoil of the mind as well as of the body.

‘What should I forgive you for?’ he repeated, watching her pick the moss from the wall and throw it over the sunk-fence into the field below. ‘For forgetting I was a stranger? But I’m not a stranger now, am I? I’ve known you a whole week!’

Her eyes grew serious again. She looked at him with surprise in them, and her hand stopped throwing the moss, and lay, a white and shapely member, upon the wall. An old-fashioned opal ring which she wore on her little finger caught the last flicker of the sinking sun. Meredith was conscious of an insane impulse to lay his own right hand upon those strong white fingers, to imprison that spark of fire before it had time to die out. Should he? Should he not? He hesitated.

‘A week?’ she said, in a tone of astonishment. ‘Is it only a week? It seems——’ She stopped, and the man beside her saw the crimson mount up under her creamy skin.

‘Like a lifetime, doesn’t it?’ he put in impetuously. ‘I can hardly fancy what it would be, now, *not* to know you. You can’t imagine what a difference it has made to me. If only——’ He stopped suddenly. What business had he to speak in this way to a girl like Evelyn Hesketh? He, a poor man, with nothing on which to keep a wife. He sighed and fell silent. The spark of fire from the heart

of the opal went suddenly out. The sun, which had called it forth, slid behind the hills. The world passed at once into shadow. A breath of chill air stirred the leaves of the poplars overhead and set them beating against each other like tiny castanets.

In the hearts of both the man and girl there was a sudden sense of change—a feeling of loss—of what? Evelyn did not ask herself. Her heart, which had begun to go pit-a-pat like the leaves of the poplars overhead, slowed down. She shivered a little in her thin dress.

Meredith, who was watching her closely, saw how her listening eyes grew gradually listless, and how the colour paled in her cheeks.

Suddenly she dropped the scraps of moss from her hands, and laughed.

‘What nonsense we’ve been talking!’ she said lightly. ‘Of course we’re strangers. How could we be anything else after a week’s acquaintance? It’s growing chilly; let’s go in.’

They moved away between the ranks of standard roses, from which the dew was drawing the intoxicating scent which only a rose can yield. Meredith sniffed it in, and it seemed to go to his head and subdue his senses. After all, why shouldn’t he at least have the satisfaction of this girl’s sympathy? ‘That need cost him nothing.’

‘Miss Hesketh,’ he said softly, ‘you said just now that there was no disgrace in failure, supposing a man has done his best. But what would you think if I told you that I was a failure, and that not only as regards the war? I’ve tried all sorts of things, and I’ve had little luck in any. I’m a sort of a rolling stone—no good at all.’ He sighed.

‘And yet you’ve done your best?’ She was grave again, and her fair face showed in the twilight like one of the creamy roses.

He hesitated. Could he tell her a lie even to gain her sympathy?

'Well,' he said, at last. 'I can hardly say. Maybe I've rolled too much. If only I had some one to keep me steadfast, I think I'd settle down and gather a little moss!' He laughed a trifle shakily. 'But I've never had any inducement. At Kimberley, indeed, there was poor Frank Clavering. I did better while he was there—was getting on quite nicely when the war broke out. But then he was killed, and I was alone in the world again, with no one to care for me. I say, won't you let me call you friend, even though we *have* known each other—only a week? It would be such a help to know that someone cared whether a fellow sinks or swims. Will you?'

He stopped and looked at his companion wistfully.

'Of course I'll be your friend, if you wish it, Mr. Meredith,' said the girl cordially; 'only'—a spice of mischief came into her eyes—'you must do your best to swim!'

He brightened under her smile, though he could not but feel that she was no longer the same as she had been while they stood by the wall in the sunset. The scent of the roses had not affected *her* head, at any rate. She was nothing but the casual acquaintance, as cool as the evening breeze.

'Then it's a bargain?' He tried to draw her back to the warmer mood which he had found so pleasant.

'I say, give me a rose in token, won't you?'

'A rose? oh, a dozen, if you like!' she answered carelessly. 'You can have them for the picking. But there are plenty at the Hall. It would be carrying coals to Newcastle to take them there.'

'No, I only want one; and you must gather it for me,' he said pleadingly. 'There—*that* one; it has a look of you.' He pointed to a great golden-hearted Maréchal Niel.

"That ? It's by no means the most beautiful. And as for being like me—thank you, Mr. Meredith, I should be highly flattered, shouldn't I ?" (she dropped him a curtsy) 'only I'm not. I've no great admiration for the Maréchal, and I don't commend your choice. But here it is !'

She handed him the rose, with a laugh.

'No ; give me the one *you* like best.'

'Indeed I won't ; I'll keep it for someone more discriminating. Come, it's time we went in.' She turned away and crossed the lawn in the direction of the house, Meredith following her, with the rose in his button-hole.

He had got what he asked for, but, somehow, he was not satisfied. He took himself to task for a blunderer. These English girls, he said to himself, were not just easy to understand, for all their seeming simplicity. With all their frankness they were coy, and needed careful handling. Like their native roses, they had their thorns, and seemed very well able to take care of themselves. But, nevertheless, if Evelyn Hesketh were a sample of her countrywomen, they were in his eyes incomparable.

'Give us a song, Evelyn,' said the Canon, as the pair followed each other into the lighted drawing-room. 'My old favourite, to begin with—"My love is like a red, red rose."'

'What ?'—Evelyn flushed rose-red herself—'surely, father, you must be tired of it. Wouldn't you like some Schubert instead ?'

'No, lass, I wouldn't ; I like the old songs best. Your mother used to sing that one, you know.'

The Canon had taken his daughter's hand as she passed him, and the words were spoken low in her ear. They were not for the ears of Mrs. Hesketh the second.

Evelyn said nothing more. She went to the piano and

sat down, singing the lovely old song without the notes, while the air from the open window brought in the scent of the roses across the twilit lawn. Meredith had thrown himself into a lounge beside her, the rose still in his button-hole.

My love is like a red, red rose, that's newly blown in June,
My love is like a melody that's sweetly played in tune.

She sang with feeling. The voice seemed to melt and penetrate, as the scent of the roses had done, so that Meredith felt his brain stimulated and his heart softened as he listened.

Till a' the seas run dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt i' the sun—

Yes, he thought, so could he love the singer, even as expressed by the song. She was a girl to love like that. If only he had not been poor! If only those diamonds, about the sale of which he was going up to London next week, had been his own, instead of merely intrusted to his care, then—— He went off into a muse, while the sweet voice went on from one song to another. But, somehow, it was only the one song that Meredith heard. It was still ringing in his ears as he walked back to his quarters at the Hall. 'If only——' Whenever he got so far in his meditations, he caught himself sighing like a November wind. 'If only—— Hang it!' he said to himself, as he went to his room, 'I suppose I'm in for it—in, head over heels, this time—and all to no purpose. It's cursed hard. For, as things are, I might almost as well hold out my hand for the moon as try for Evelyn Hesketh. Yet I've never wanted a girl so much. Well, there seems nothing for it but to go. Maybe, London will help to put her out of my head. Heigh-ho! Sweet? I should just think so; but not for me.'

He took the Maréchal Niel out of his button-hole, and inhaled the perfume. Then, with an impatient movement, he flung it from him towards the open window.

'She laughed at me for thinking it like her,' he thought bitterly. 'She thought me a fool, I dare say—as I am—and yet——'

He went up to the window and looked out into the lingering twilight. The air was full of the scent he had been breathing all the evening. He looked down. There lay the rose upon the sill ; it had fallen short. He took it up and stroked its petals tenderly. 'No,' he said. 'After all, I *can't* throw it away.' And he put it in water on his table.

In her white bed-room, across the river, Evelyn Hesketh, also, stood at the window looking over the water to where the Hall rose dark above its woods against the sky. She had thrown off her pretty dress and was in her dressing-gown, brushing out her long thick hair.

'I'm a goose !' she said to herself, as she brought the brush down vehemently upon her head. 'A downright goose ! I couldn't have thought I could be so silly. Only a week—yet, here I am listening and talking as I've never cared to listen or talk to Gilbert whom I've known for years. Poor Gilbert, he's been very patient, and I always thought I'd like him enough in time. But, now, I don't think I ever shall—not if—— But it's rubbish, fair rubbish ! There's nothing in it, after all—*can't* be, in so short a time, whatever he may appear to think. So, Evelyn, my dear, don't be a fool. Go to bed and to sleep, and wisdom will come in the morning.'

She finished brushing her hair, and twisted it up ; then stood with her hands by her sides, still looking out to where the river sang on in the twilight under the high-backed bridge.

The breeze crept in from the garden, bringing with it the scent of roses.

‘Poor old Maréchal Niel,’ thought the girl. ‘I never knew before that I didn’t admire you. Why did I say so, I wonder? You’re not at all a bad fellow, after all, though you’re only a common rose. I wonder what he’s done with you? Thrown you away, by now, I suppose. He looked so vexed when I laughed at his choice. How silly men are, to be sure—even the heroes of South Africa!’

CHAPTER XI

IN THE WAY OF TEMPTATION

How sweet . . .
 To watch the long bright river drawing slowly
 His waters from the purple hill—

Only to hear and see the far-off sparkling brine,
 Only to hear were sweet—

TENNYSON : *The Lotus Eaters.*

THREE weeks later Claude Meredith sat in the coffee-room of his London hotel, reading a note. It was written on scented paper, with broad black edges of the breadth supposed to measure a widow's deepest woe ; and the writing upon it was of that small and hair-like character which calls up the echo of a voice with but scanty covering to its poor little bones. A voice, in fact, worn by mourning to 'a bit of thread,' like Augustus, in the German nursery-rhyme, on the fifth day of his fast. Meredith smiled involuntarily, as the words and the letters which composed them conjured the writer up before his mind's eye, in all her pale and fragile prettiness. A very weeping-willow.

'I know I have only to ask you, dear Mr. Meredith,' she wrote, 'you, to whom my dear husband has confided the care of his widow and fatherless boy, to do us this trifling favour.'

And then she proceeded to request his escort to Hatherlea for the said 'fatherless boy' on his journey from school for the summer holidays.

'And,' she concluded, 'you must pay us a long visit to make my son's acquaintance and enjoy such shooting as the Hatherlea moors can afford you.'

Meredith folded the letter, and went and stood by the

window of the coffee-room, watching the traffic in the hot and dusty street. How hot it was : how dusty and how stuffy ! The air that came in through the partly-open sash was as though baked in an oven. There was a smell of mingled carbolic and hot horse-flesh in it which was far from refreshing. A big blue-bottle fly sang and bounced against the upper panes of glass, as though rebelling against fate with futile protest. Why didn't it fly a little lower and make its escape ? Meredith wondered. Of that, however, the creature never seemed to think, for it went on bouncing and singing shrilly within half a yard of the open sash.

'Fool !' muttered Meredith ; 'if it wants to get out why doesn't it go ?' and he caught the blundering insect and tossed it into the air.

'I'm as bad as the blue-bottle,' he thought, as he watched it fly upward. 'Here's a way out for me. I want to escape from this stuffy place, from which all who can do so have already flown. My work here is done ; the diamonds are sold—and well sold. I'd give anything to get away from bricks and mortar ; and yet I hesitate. Well, this letter of Mrs. Clavering's has brought things to a point. I must decide one way or the other before the north post goes. Is it to be "yes," or "no" ?'

Here his mind ceased from conscious working, and, in place of the busy street, there arose before it a vision of heathery hills and chafing brown water. He saw the cloud-shadows chasing each other across a carpet of purple and green, and heard the quick '*Quebec-beck-beck-beck !*' of a pack of grouse, and the whirl of their bright brown wings as they skimmed across the moors. He saw, too, an active figure in short skirt and sailor hat, standing knee-deep in heather, with the sunshine on her hair and its light in her golden eyes. And she seemed to hold up her finger and beckon.

The vision was so divinely fresh and fair that Meredith involuntarily caught in his breath, as though to inhale the

feebly. In his capacity of guardian he felt it incumbent on him to put matters in a proper light before his ward, whatever his own opinion on the subject might be. It is a way which grown-up people, not much used to children, usually have, a little bit of acting which their juniors are quite capable of seeing through.

‘Oh, of course!’ was the careless reply. ‘And medicine has to be taken; but that’s no reason a fellow should pretend to like it. Mr. Meredith, are you a good shot?’

The change of subject was so abrupt that Claude wondered for a moment whether shooting and medicine could have any connection. But decided that, like an immature scholar, Master Clavering was simply careless about his stops.

‘Because,’ went on the boy, after waiting a moment for the answer that did not come, ‘if you *are*, you must teach me to shoot. I wanted to learn, last season, but mother wouldn’t let me, because Cousin Gillie said I was too young. Such rot, wasn’t it? If all our fellows had learnt to shoot when they were boys, like the young Boers, you know, we should have done much better than we have. Old Wiper—that’s my schoolmaster, you know; we call him Wiper because his name’s Penn—old Wiper says so, and he ought to know. I say, Mr. Meredith, how many Boers have you shot?’

The drop of the voice into the confidential tone, at this last question, was so amusing that Meredith laughed aloud.

‘Really, I can’t tell you,’ he said.

‘Can’t you? Oh, *do*! I say, if you missed them all, never mind confessing it, I’ll not blab.’

‘Not so bad as that, Bertie,’ was the amused answer. ‘I sent a very fair number to their account, though they shot *me* in the end.’

‘I know; mother wrote to me about that. And they shot father too—which was very sad for me.’

The words were said quite calmly, as an after-thought, apparently, and the eager little face lost none of its brightness in the utterance. But then, as Meredith reflected, the boy could have seen little or nothing of his father.

‘Well, then, I consider you’ve proved yourself a good enough shot to teach me,’ went on Bertie with innocent patronage. ‘You will, won’t you? I’m just squirming to learn.’

A small brown hand stole through Meredith’s arm, and the bright blue eyes looked up pleadingly into his face.

‘Maybe, I will, if Mrs. Clavering allows it,’ answered Meredith. He was rapidly warming to this small sapling of the parent stock, who was, at the same time, so like and so unlike his father. The boy had all the charm of manner that had attracted Meredith to his friend. He had the facile, bright good humour and zest for pleasure which was the fatal heritage of most of the Claverings. But there was a firmness about the young mouth, a certain masterful expression in the winsome blue eyes which bespoke a stronger fibre than poor Frank Clavering had possessed. There was something of ‘Cousin Gillie’ in him, as it seemed, which might, with judicious culture, serve as ballast to his lighter qualities.

‘Oh, mother will allow it, if *you* do!’ was the confident reply. ‘You’re my guardian, she says. I say, are you *really*? I shouldn’t mind submitting to *you*, if you are. But I can’t stand Cousin Gillie. He has no real authority over *me*—now, has he?’

Meredith felt a difficulty in replying to this second question, so he ignored it in favour of the first. ‘Your father left you in my charge,’ he said gravely. ‘He was my great friend, Bertie; you must always remember that, and try to look on me as your friend as well.’

‘I’m quite willing,’ was the careless answer. ‘I think

we'll get on very well. I say, what a crowd ; and what jolly dogs and guns ! You must get mother to buy me one—I mean a gun. Father took his to South Africa. You didn't happen to bring it home, now, did you ?'

Meredith had to confess the omission, and this ended the conversation. For the hansom stopped at the crowded platform, and there was a rush for places in the train.

'Well, mother, and how are you—pretty fit, eh ?' was the heir's salutation to his parent as soon as the little crape-draped figure had released him from the embrace which had enveloped him in its folds.

'Pretty fit ? Oh, Bertie, my darling, how can you use such an expression ?' piped the still small voice of Mrs. Clavering. 'I'm fit for nothing now-a-days. There's no one to support me under my troubles, but you, my darling boy. You must be very good to your widowed mother, my sweet.' The weeping-willow bent over her boy's slim shoulder, and dissolved, to his great embarrassment, into tears.

'Oh, come, mother !' he cried, in a voice of much disgust. 'Don't turn on the watercarts ; you know how much I hate it. There—I'll support you first-rate, if you'll only not give way. I'll soon be a man, you know—at least, I'm half-way there. I'll be twenty-one in no time. Take my arm and we'll go to the sofa. Oh, you can lean *quite* hard. I've been doing Sandow's exercises, and I'm as strong as a horse. I say, mother, Mr. Meredith's going to teach me to shoot. He's promised to take me out on the Twelfth. Haven't you, sir ?'

'With Mrs. Clavering's permission, my boy,' was the prudent reply of the guardian, who had been standing aside, apparently almost unnoticed during the endearments of mother and son, though Meredith was not without suspicion

that the widow was less unconscious of his presence than she seemed, and that her tears and caresses savoured a little of playing to the gallery. He could never quite rid himself of this feeling in Mrs. Clavering's presence; though he would fain have believed her sincere, and could find no proof that she was otherwise.

'We must see what Gilbert says,' began the little woman doubtfully. 'I'm not at all sure——'

'Oh, mother, *do* be quiet!' put in the boy impatiently. 'What has Cousin Gillie got to do with it? Mr. Meredith is my guardian—he *says* so; and he told me father gave me into his charge, and that nobody else has any right to say a word.'

'Come, Bertie,' Meredith broke in hastily, for he saw the mother looked annoyed, 'you're not reporting me correctly. I said nothing about your cousin. And, of course, Mrs. Clavering has the right to say what she likes.'

'I should *think* so!' exclaimed the little lady, forgetting the rôle of the weeping-willow, and speaking with uplifted head, and in quite another tone. 'Bertie has been under my charge all his life—it isn't likely I'm going to abdicate now. If his father had desired——'

But here the widow seemed to remember herself, for she broke off hastily, and put her black-and-white handkerchief to her eyes.

'It's hard,' she sobbed, 'very hard, to come between a widow and her only child.'

Meredith was much embarrassed. He would have liked to shake Master Bertie for the wilful twisting of a guardian's words to suit the ward's desires. But the boy, having fired his shot, had beaten a retreat through the open window, and was in shrill conversation with an ecstatic terrier and with the old gardener, leaving his late companion to bear the brunt of reprisals.

'I hope you'll believe me, Mrs. Clavering,' said Meredith earnestly. 'I've no wish to interfere. Your boy is excited over his home-coming, and hardly knows what he is saying, or he would not have so misrepresented me.'

The lady put away her handkerchief with a smile. There were no traces of tears in her pretty eyes, or upon her delicate cheeks; and again Meredith was tempted to doubt the reality of what had been so vividly shown forth.

'Ah, well,' she said graciously, 'we'll say no more about it. I only wished matters to be plainly understood between us. So *much* better, you know. As to the shooting, I shall probably make no objection, if it were only to show Gilbert that I will have no interference on his part. There has been too much of that already.'

The last words were said in a tone that was almost snappish, and Meredith smiled to himself as he heard it.

'No love lost in *that* quarter,' he thought, 'by either mother or son. Well, as she puts it, so much the better; it will make things easier for me.'

'By-the-by, he is coming to dinner—Mr. Clavering, I mean—and my aunts, the Miss Williamsons, are with me,' said the hostess over her shoulder, as, the dressing-bell having rung, she preceded her visitor upstairs. 'Gilbert wanted to see the boy, and I thought it as well that you should meet. There may be several things you will need to talk over together. I quite forget, however, whether I mentioned that you were coming. My memory has been so bad since——' A sigh filled in the blank.

'So "Cousin Gillie" and I are to meet,' said Meredith to himself, as he shut his door, and threw off his coat. 'When Greek meets Greek——'; a smile completed the quotation.

CHAPTER XII

GREEK MEETS GREEK

When will you have your inventory brought, sir?
Or see a copy of the will? Anon!

BEN JONSON: *The Fox*.

THE Miss Williamsons were dressing in the room next Meredith's. There was a door of communication between the two—carefully locked by the spinsters, it need hardly be said, yet not impervious to sound. For Claude was aware of the voices of the ladies in constant conversation, and though they were not unconscious of the fact that he was washing his hands, they forgot, at times, that voices, especially female ones, carry quite as far as the splashing of water.

At first he could hear nothing but an indistinct murmur. But, when Miss Teresa came to 'do' her hair at the dressing-table, which stood across the aforesaid door, she had only to raise her voice a little, which, in the excitement of discussion she frequently did, to admit her next-door neighbour in a manner behind the scenes.

'Now Maria, what were you thinking of to put in the second-best brushes?' Meredith heard a brisk voice say, in a tone of reproach, as he fastened his tie before the mirror. 'I told you how it would be if I trusted you to pack the portmanteau. But, really, I hadn't time to do more than the dress-basket, and you promised to be so careful! I do wish Rose would give us a little more notice when she asks us to play propriety. I hate to be hurried like

this ! *That's* not what she asks us for, you say ? My dear Maria ! How can you be so simple ? Does she *ever* ask us to stay except when there's gentlemen ? I wonder whether she means to marry this Mr. Meredith ? I always *said*, you know, she was *certain* to marry again (if any one asked her) once Frank were out of the way.'

Meredith's hands were, all of a sudden, incapable of finishing the tie. He felt his face flush, and a chill run down his back, as he listened with all his might for the answer.

It came ; but in a slow and rather drawling voice, by no means so easy to hear.

'I wish you would not say such things, Teresa. It isn't fair on poor Rose to accuse her of husband-hunting, and she a new-made widow ! Besides, so far as *I* can see, Mr. Meredith has no such intention.'

'And, for *once* in a way, you see correctly, Maria,' went on the brisker and more audible speaker. 'It's Evelyn Hesketh he has his eye on, if *I'm* not mistaken.'

'But we always thought she'd marry Gilbert Clavering. I'm sure you've remarked a hundred times, at least, that he is quite devoted to her. And he's been so very constant, that——'

'She ought to marry him ? Why, no, that doesn't exactly follow. If she'd wanted him, she could have had him any time these five years ; nay, he's fancied her ever since she was a girl of sixteen in the schoolroom, as *I* believe. But he's a poor man and no great catch, and she ought to marry money. Lady Margaret said as much ; for the Canon has not much private means, and they live well up to their income. This Mr. Meredith is very rich, they say. Still, Evelyn and Gilbert have always been good friends, and I'm not saying she won't take him in the end, if—— Oh, Maria, *do* tell me if my hair looks right ? You've forgotten

to bring the hand-glass, and I can't see if that thin patch at the back is properly covered. The dinner-bell will be ringing directly, and I wouldn't appear, for the world, unless I were sure those coils were properly put on. Such a price as I paid for them too ! I wish I had as much hair as you have.'

'Just give me your hair-pins. There, that's all right. How nice you look, Teresa !'

'It's more than *you* do, Maria ; your hair is all sticking up on end. Why can't you use pomade ? You may have plenty of it—hair I mean. But if you don't take care, it'll be as harsh as a bottle-brush and as grey as a badger in no time. Now, *do* stand still while I put you to rights, or you'll not be fit to be seen. There's the dinner-bell ! For heaven's sake take off your *peignoir* before you go downstairs ! Is Evelyn coming, this evening ?'

Meredith did not hear the answer, for the ladies opened their door, and, apparently, they subdued their voices to suit the publicity of the passage ; for only a discreet murmur, accompanied by the *swish* of silken skirts, came to his listening ear.

'Is Evelyn coming ?' The question rang on in his own mind, awaking a keen vibration of expectancy, as, after allowing his neighbours to get well under way, he followed them to the drawing-room. Did he hope she would be there, or did he fear it ? Both, certainly. But whether hope or fear predominated he could not have told, till he opened the drawing-room door, and a hasty glance round the room assured him that it was empty of the one figure he was looking for. Then, the sudden sinking of his heart came as a sufficient answer.

Mrs. Clavering was sitting on the sofa, with her boy by her side, flanked by the Miss Williamsons, like a group of Faith, Hope, and Charity. Cousin Gilbert, an evident supernumerary, stood at the window, with his back to the

room. He turned as Meredith entered, and Mrs. Clavering rose and introduced the two men.

They looked at each other, and their eyes crossed like drawn swords.

'We have met already,' said Claude ; and he held out his hand. But Gilbert only bowed.

'A sulky-looking beggar, if ever there was one !' thought Meredith, as he looked at the cloudy brow, and noted the stiffness of the greeting.

'That snob ! If she'd told me he was coming I would have kept away,' was the inward comment of the other man. Rather an unfair one, too ; for Claude Meredith, though colonial, was not a snob. But when men are anti-pathetic and jealous of each other, they are seldom perfectly fair, any more than women under similar circumstances ; though such is not the received opinion—among the men, at any rate.

During dinner they hardly exchanged a sentence, though there was plenty of talk between them and the women. Little Bertie was the occasion of the only direct give and take of words between man and man, and 'the occasion' was made to feel a little like the point of contact between two electric batteries. But boys are not the most tactful creatures in the world, and can seldom be taught to let well alone ; and Bertie Clavering was so full of his shooting that he was unable to resist the forwarding of his desires by seizing this opportunity of letting his cousin know that further opposition on his part was unnecessary.

'Cousin Gilbert,' he said in his high treble, with a glance of defiance across the table out of those determined blue eyes of his, 'Mr. Meredith is going to teach me to shoot ; and mother will let me go out with the rest on the Twelfth if I'm ready by then.'

Gilbert Clavering was helping himself to jelly when

the boy fired this point-blank shot, during a pause of the conversation. Meredith could see that his face changed. But he said nothing till he had conveyed the quaking morsel safely to his plate. Then he looked up, and uttered a short 'Indeed!'

'Yes,' went on the boy, 'it's all settled; isn't it, mother?'

Mrs. Clavering looked uneasy. She put down the spoon with which she was eating her cherry tart, and said, with a deprecating glance at Gilbert:

'Well, I thought he might try, this season. He's getting a big boy, you see. And now the property is his, it seems—— You've no objection, have you?'

'Well, Rose, since you ask me, I have. I think he is still too young. But, of course——'

'Too young? Oh, I say, that's all rot!' broke in the boy, with angry irritation, calling forth a nervous 'Hush, Bertie!' from his mother, and a shocked 'Oh, fie!' from the two Miss Williamsons.

'You must forgive him, Gilbert,' said the mother of the irate young squire. 'He's very eager about the matter, or I'm sure he wouldn't have spoken so—so strongly.'

'Or, rudely, rather,' muttered Gilbert. 'But it doesn't matter. I only want you to consider the danger there is for children when a lot of sportsmen get together, some of them a bit excited, and the shots are all over the place. I wouldn't trust a boy of mine—if I had one—till he was old enough to keep his head.'

Bertie glared at him across the table. To be classed with children was really too exasperating. He was bursting out with another defiance, when his mother laid a trembling hand on the little brown paw beside her.

'Hush, Bertie, dear,' she said soothingly. 'Let *me* manage it.'

The touch and the whispered encouragement acted like magic. Though he still glared defiance at Gilbert, the boy kept silence.

‘Still, Gilbert, if his guardian is willing to take charge of him, I *think* we might venture,’ went on Mrs. Clavering, with soft deprecation. Nevertheless, under the tremulous pleading there lurked a certain decision, which warned her hearers that she had already made up her mind as to the course she meant to pursue.

Gilbert Clavering, who had, meantime, been quietly consuming his jelly, with a coolness which rivalled that of the dainty he was feeding on, looked up on this, with a lift of the head which showed that he was stung.

‘His guardian!’ he said pointedly. ‘Am I to understand that that matter is definitely arranged?’

‘Yes,’ said Meredith, who had been listening in silence up to this point. He spoke in a tone of authority, and again the eyes of the two men crossed like a challenge. ‘I thought that everyone understood by now that the late Mr. Clavering, my friend, had appointed me as his sole executor and guardian to his son.’

‘Pardon me,’ was the quiet answer; which, nevertheless, to one who knew the speaker, betrayed a rigid self-restraint, ‘a general understanding is hardly equivalent to an official announcement. I am the boy’s nearest male relative; but, up to now, I have heard nothing on the subject which I can accept as authentic.’

The Miss Williamsons looked at one another in trepidation, dreading an explosion. Bertie opened his blue eyes wider, and pricked up his ears, like a horse that scents the battle. Mrs. Clavering began to regret that she had asked these two to dinner. Anything like a scene (unless she were making it herself) always gave the little woman a fit of palpitation.

'Really, Gilbert,' she began plaintively, 'I'm sure I told you—— But there, never mind ; you and Mr. Meredith can go into the matter presently. I'm quite afraid——'

But she need not have been. Though the air was certainly electric between the two men, they were both too well-bred to quarrel in public, especially before women.

'Ah, yes,' said Meredith, with a laugh, 'Mr. Clavering and I will fight the matter out when you are gone ; I undertake to give him every satisfaction. If I had not been obliged to go to town, I should have ventured to ask for an interview before now. Really, Mrs. Clavering, you don't know what a relief it is to escape into fresh air ! I felt like Daniel in the Lion's Den—I mean the fiery furnace—it *was* Daniel who was roasted, wasn't it ? (I'm a little vague in my Scripture history)—all the time I was there—I'm not much used to towns. Everyone well about here, I hope ?'

'Oh, yes, I think so,' answered Mrs. Clavering, with an air of great relief ; while the Miss Williamsons, with a reassuring glance at each other, returned to the enjoyment of their dinner ; and Bertie, with a sigh, abandoned the hope of what he called 'a shindy,' and comforted himself with another helping of 'trifle.' 'Lady Margaret has not been *quite* herself, certainly ; but she's better now. And Evelyn—I asked her here this evening ; but she had a choir practice and couldn't come. You'll see her at church on Sunday—if you go, that is. But you men are not exactly models in that way.'

Meredith, certainly, was not. But he made up his mind, on the spot, that Hatherlea Church should have him for a worshipper, whoever else might stay away.

'Yes, Aunt Maria, we'll excuse you. I see you're on the *qui vive* to be away to your class,' said Mrs. Clavering,

presently, when the dessert had been put upon the table. 'Miss Williamson has a class of village lads,' she explained, turning to Meredith. 'She does no end of good, and is quite the Canon's right hand. There—don't trouble to deny it, Aunt Maria ; *we* know better. They're all devoted to you, I'm sure. There's no one like you for keeping the riff-raff out of mischief. Not riff-raff? Oh, I beg your pardon! You've made all our black sheep into snow-white lambs, haven't you, dear?'

'I wish I could, Rose,' said the gentle lady, with tears in her eyes. 'But you little know how often I despair. Many a time I've been tempted to give it up as a hopeless business——'

'I only wish you would, Maria!' said her sister brusquely. 'The chills you've given yourself, tramping alongside of the ploughs after those lads when they won't come to you, and the boots you've ruined, are beyond count! You and Mr. Allison are just alike in that way. You've conversion on the brain, both of you, and you ought to run in couples—in a Salvation Army's van.'

But Miss Williamson looked horrified, and flushed with annoyance.

'Oh, Teresa, how *can* you!' she exclaimed. 'You know I don't approve of the Salvation Army; and, as for Mr. Allison, he's a Catholic, the Canon *says* he is. It's too unkind of you to compare me to him. I wouldn't hold his doctrines for the world.'

'Where's your charity, Miss Maria?' asked Gilbert with a cynical smile. 'You pious folk seem to have a very small stock to go on. You'd rather we compared you to the publicans and sinners than to the Saint of Lavingham, as I've heard him called, I verily believe!'

'So I would, Gilbert,' exclaimed the good lady decidedly, though she was nervous and flurried to the edge

of tears. 'Are we not told that such go into the Kingdom of Heaven before——'

'Before good men who don't think on the same lines as yourself? Oh, fie, Miss Maria! But, there—see how you Christians love one another! You set us heathen a nice example.'

'Oh, Gilbert, *please* don't be so profane!' cried the poor lady, who was one of those good creatures on whom the pearls of irony and humour are worse than thrown away, and whose troughs must be filled with the plainest food, if it is to be swallowed with any profit. 'You *know* you are not a heathen. Are you not my godson, and did I not hold you at your christening when you were a dear little baby? Ah, if only you had remained as you were, what a blessing it would have been! For of such——'

But poor Miss Maria's words were drowned in a cascade of laughter, under cover of which she escaped from the dining-room to her class.

'Poor, dear Maria!' said her younger sister, as Mrs. Clavering gave the sign for withdrawal. 'It's a pity she hasn't the seventh sense; she does make such a fool of herself for want of it. And yet she is so good!'

'Ay, good as gold,' was the hearty answer of her godson, who had risen to open the door. 'I ought to have remembered her little peculiarities. We all have them you know, Teresa. They're like the little knobs on the bark of the oak-tree—they don't affect the soundness of the heart within. There's no better woman than your sister, and it's a shame to laugh at her. Only——'

'Only the thought of *you* as a dear little baby in long clothes was a little too much, Gilbert!'

'Ay, I'm sair warsened syne, I fear, as the old woman said. But, may be, I'm not so bad as my godmother

thinks. You must make my excuses, Teresa, if I don't see her again.'

He shut the door of division between the masculine and feminine portions of the party ; and the women, having despatched their budding specimen of the former to his bed, went to the drawing-room.

'It's rather like leaving two game-cocks together, isn't it, Rose ?' said Teresa Williamson, taking up her knitting and settling herself in one of the deep window-seats to catch the last of the fading light.

Mrs. Clavering threw herself into an easy-chair, with a big yawn. She could afford herself that ungraceful luxury with only her aunts present ; though she would not for the world have indulged in it except in 'undress society.' 'Well, so long as they don't fly at each other till we're out of the room it doesn't much matter, my dear,' she said carelessly. 'They're bound to have it out, *some time*, I suppose, so the sooner it's over the better. I'm just as well pleased there's a feeling of rivalry, it will leave Bertie and me so much more free. I can play them off against each other,' was the concluding thought of the sequence. But this Mrs. Clavering left in the treasury of her own mind ; it was not minted into words. With this consideration she carefully scanned the faces of both the men, when, after a very short interval, they rejoined herself and her aunt. But, except for a touch of formality in the manner of each to the other, there was no sign of a passage-at-arms.

'Back already ?' she cried, throwing to each indiscriminately one of her sweetest smiles. 'You're very flattering to two old women, like Aunt Teresa and me. I should have thought you'd have preferred your cigars to our society.'

Rose Clavering glanced at herself in a mirror which hung

opposite, as she said this, and thought how young and interesting she looked in her widow's weeds. Women, unless they are really old—'widows, indeed,' so to say—do not make speeches like this except as an angle for compliments. Though by no means blind to the hook, Gilbert paid no attention to it; he took his coffee-cup in silence, and silently sipped the contents.

Claude Meredith, whom Nature had not provided with the armour of proof worn by the other, looked uncomfortable. He was painfully aware that a pretty speech was expected by the pretty woman at his side. But a man does not usually learn the use of such society-counters in the colonies; and the remembrance of what he had overheard as to Mrs. Clavering's matrimonial intentions made him afraid.

So he murmured awkwardly something about the pleasure of female society of any sort whatever, a reply which was so much the reverse of flattering as to make Mrs. Clavering frown, and sharp-witted Teresa laugh.

'That's very kind of you, Mr. Meredith,' she said caustically. '*Faute de mieux*, Rose? Well, never mind. We are preferred to cigars, when all's said and done, which is always *something*. No, Mr. Meredith, don't try to get out of it. *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse*, you know.'

'But we *did* have our cigars, Miss Teresa,' said Gilbert maliciously; 'or, rather, Mr. Meredith did. I am faithful to my pipe.'

'The pipe of peace?' asked Miss Teresa mischievously.

Gilbert Clavering threw a peculiar look at his fellow smoker, which Miss Teresa swiftly intercepted.

'If you like to call it so,' he said enigmatically. 'What's in a name?'

He put down his empty coffee-cup, and stood up to say good-night.

CHAPTER XIII

HIS HEART'S DESIRE

To see her is to love her,
To love but her for ever,
For Nature made her what she is,
And ne'er made anither !—BURNS.

‘ You will see her at church on Sunday.’

This is what Gilbert Clavering had said to himself, every Saturday, for over five years. And, accordingly, every Sunday, rain or shine, he was to be seen, either at the morning or evening service, in his place at Hatherlea Church. For Gilbert, at any rate, was what his cousin's widow would have called ‘ a model churchgoer,’ despite the fact that he described himself as ‘ a heathen,’ and had a cynical way of mentioning religion (when he mentioned it at all) which scandalized his godmother.

‘ If *that's* what you think, I wonder you go to church, Gilbert,’ the good lady was wont to say.

But Gilbert only smiled, and let her wonder.

He knew why he went ; or, at least, he thought he did, which is as far as many of us get in the examination of our own motives. For these are so often mixed that, unless we are very skilful as self-analysts, we are apt to fall into the error of picking out the chief ingredients in the motive-power which goes to the making of action, to the neglect of the less apparent.

But if Evelyn Hesketh was the lodestone that drew him to Hatherlea Church, she did not account for his occasional

appearances at Lavingham, at least after the first time, when she had acted as his escort thither on the occasion of a harvest thanksgiving. The truth is that, careless though Gilbert Clavering had, at one time, been, and cynical as he still was, concerning the popular demonstrations of what is called 'the religious world,' there was, deep down in the man's being, a respect for what is really good, and a half-unconscious seeking after that 'anchorage of the soul' which, as yet, he had been unable to find.

If the leading had come through the heart, it did not, necessarily, end there, whatever he might think. If, at present, he only saw Evelyn Hesketh on the heavenward path, it did not follow that the visible guide was all. But grown men are very like little children in these matters—they only see the apparent.

Gilbert, accordingly, as he walked, next morning, those three miles across the moors, along the old pack-road which was the 'short-cut' from Brackenside to Hatherlea, said to himself that he was going to church simply and solely to see Evelyn. And, for the matter of that, he saw her all along the way. In imagination she walked beside him, as he tramped the grass-grown track, that, like a length of narrow green ribbon, threaded the carpet of heather—rose-red, purple, and lilac-tinged, according to the various stages of blossoming—with which August had spread the moors and fells.

How lovely is the world on such a morning as this 'in the North Countree'! What perfume of mingled pungency and honey-sweetness fills the boundless fields of air, as the light breeze passes unchecked over miles of ling, and bracken, and bent, not to speak of those banks 'whereon the wild thyme grows.' You hear it go by, like a spirit, with a sigh and a rustle of the unseen wings. A thousand dainty blue-bells sway on their hair-like stalks, as it touches

them with finger-tips, till you fancy you can almost catch the faint chiming of a veritable fairy peal. Blue as forget-me-nots is the sky overhead, where white clouds sail, ship-like, in a sea of untainted air, casting their soft shadows on the purple beneath, and trying to tempt you to a race, as they hurry on their way.

Butterflies—white and yellow and tortoise-shell—flit hither and thither, catching the sunlight on their brilliant wings. Bees make a drowsy buzzing in the heather-bells, and then trumpet their triumph over the honey-loot as they hasten to the hive.

And—sweetest music of all to a sportsman's ear—listen to that wild '*Beck-beck-beck ! Quebec !*' the *réveille* of the grouse as they fly up startled from the heather at your feet. It called back Gilbert's thoughts for a moment from their habitual resting-place, and made him say to himself, with satisfaction, that birds were plentiful and strong on the wing, and the prospects of the season most encouraging. But, the next moment, the grouse were out of sight and out of mind, and the flying cloud-shadow by Gilbert's side had, to his faithful fancy, taken the form of Evelyn Hesketh.

For, do what he would, the thought of the beloved woman was ever with him ; sternly kept in the background, indeed, in business hours, but always to the fore when his mind was at leisure.

Though he knew that, as yet, she cared but little for him. Though her 'No' had smitten down his hopes more than once, they had always grown up as a new crop which is ready for the scythe. For Hope dies hard in the heart of a man like Gilbert Clavering—a man of firm resolve and tenacious spirit ; who has proved by experience that most things in this world are to be won by patient determination. So long as there was no one else in the field, he always said to himself, given time, his love must end in

compelling hers. For friendship, at least, there had always been between these two ; and friendship between man and woman is, proverbially, a variable quantity, which, not unusually, turns into something else.

So long as there was no one else in the field. But there lay the danger, the insecurity of the situation. The lover's jealous instinct told Gilbert that that 'some one else' was already in the field, or likely to take it. And he hated that 'someone' accordingly. Though he said to himself that Claude Meredith was 'a snob,' 'an adventurer,' 'an impossible person altogether,' he could not deny that the man was possessed of a certain attraction likely to please the women. He allowed that he was handsome—after a fashion ; genial—to a certain extent. He had seen a good deal of the world—the world of the colonies certainly, but still 'the world.' Above all, he possessed that sign-manual of distinction which Britain was, just then, delighting to honour in her children—he had fought for his country and had been wounded in her service. In the eyes of the ordinary girl, Gilbert well knew that this was a crown of glory, quite enough to invest its wearer with an ideal robe, sufficiently ample to cover a multitude of defects. True, Evelyn Hesketh was to him no 'ordinary girl.' But, nevertheless, he had observed in her a propensity to hero-worship ; and though, hitherto, this had been harmlessly expended on heroes outside her orbit, this was no reason that, should one of these comets come within it, her star would prove itself cold enough to escape conflagration.

The further Gilbert Clavering descended into the valley the greater became the torment of jealous misgivings. So long as he was on the heights, and had the upper world of moor and fell to himself, the thought of Evelyn had been as sweet and refreshing as the air he breathed. But, no sooner was he down in the haunts of men, where the sun

was hot and the breeze was still, than, like the swarm of flies which attacked him, came a crowd of torturing fancies. 'Fool !' whispered one in his ear. 'You've lived in a dream till you think it reality. You'd better wake up while 'tis yet time.' 'Don't you see,' buzzed another, 'that already she cares more for the other, though she has only known him a few weeks, than, in all these years, you have taught her to care for you ? Why should you waste a thought on a woman who never thinks of you ? Let her go, or she'll spoil your life.'

Gilbert Clavering set his teeth and clenched his hand under the sting of these crowding thoughts. For he could not but recognise that the venom lay in the fact that they spoke the truth, and he could no more get rid of them than the flies. What can a man do when a woman has so grown into his life that, short of cutting away the better portion of his heart, he cannot pluck her out ? Call such a love an 'inordinate affection,' a disease of the mind, if you like ; that does not make it any easier to cure. It is, moreover, such a disease as only attacks those in whom is combined a steadfast nature and a tender heart—men and women who do not change, and who suffer accordingly, when their love is not returned in the measure in which they give it. It is the hard, the selfish, and the shifting, whose affections give no trouble to themselves.

The three bells, which are all that Hatherlea Church can boast, were changing their chime and beginning to ring the people in, when Gilbert Clavering reached the village.

He thought he saw the flash of a white gown under the little doorway which was used by the Rectory folk, and his heart gave a quickened beat. He felt sure it belonged to Evelyn, and was vexed with himself for arriving just too late for a possible greeting before service should begin.

And then he saw something else, which, for the moment,

put even the white gown out of his head—a grey tweed suit, coming over the high-backed bridge, which, somehow, set his teeth on edge whenever his eyes fell on it.

‘That snob!’ he muttered. ‘Why can’t he dress decently, at least on Sundays?’

For, of course the suit in question contained the person of Claude Meredith, and, equally of course (of malice prepense, as Gilbert thought) he came up to the church gate at the very same moment as Mr. Clavering. And again the latter was vexed—with Claude as well as himself, this time—for arriving just too soon to avoid a meeting.

The two men raised their hats to each other with a gravity which was sufficiently eloquent. Then each stepped ceremoniously aside to allow the other to enter first. For it is curious how much our manners have changed in this respect from those of our forefathers. In the days of cloaks and rapiers, we jostled our rivals out of the way, and insisted on taking the crown of the causeway. Now that we wear coats, and carry no weapon more offensive than a walking-stick, the more we dislike a man the greater is the ceremony with which we treat him.

‘And what may it be that brings *you* to church?’ was the unspoken question in each man’s eyes, as he waited for his rival to pass through the white-painted gate into the green churchyard.

Neither seemed inclined to accept the precedence accorded him by the other. But, fortunately, the awkward pause lasted but an instant; for Mrs. Clavering and her boy, with the two Miss Williamsons, who had been stopped on the bridge by a village matron who wanted a place for her girl, came up, the next moment, and, with a nod to Gilbert, walked straight into church. Meredith went in with them, and Clavering, pausing just long enough to be free of the party from the Hall, followed. Hatherlea

Church had, of course, been restored. Where is the church, now-a-days, which has not undergone this process of rejuvenation? But, as is often the case, the so-called restoration in nowise recalled the ancient beauty of the building. Good old oak pews had been replaced by cheap new seats, varnished till they stuck to your back like plaster. Whitewash had blushed into pink distemper, discoloured in places by recent damp till it suggested an attack of measles. The Ten Commandments and the royal arms, which had formerly flanked and surmounted the altar—or, as the Canon always made a point of calling it, the ‘Communion table’—had yielded their places to tawdry texts. Only the ‘Communion table’ itself made no pretence at restoration. To have transformed itself into even the semblance of an Altar would, in Hatherlea eyes, have savoured too dangerously of Popery. So it continued to be aggressively Protestant, in full red velvet petticoat and absence of any ornament save books, cushion and plate, and looked so much like a sideboard as to justify the Canon in refusing it a more ecclesiastical name.

The Canon, indeed, was alike proud of his church and of his principles. The two were equally uncompromising, though in rather a different sense; and neither had cost him anything to speak of: a mighty convenient thing. He boasted, in fact, that he had restored his church more economically than any other in all the diocese. And no one gainsaid the boast. You had only to look at the church to feel sure that the satisfaction of the restorer was perfectly justified by the results. For it recalled nothing more strongly than an elderly woman in poor circumstances, who, refusing to grow old gracefully, is yet unable to rejuvenate effectually by reason of the lightness of her purse. The obvious paint and powder, which she wears so complacently, deceive nobody but herself; which, after all, is a very

innocent deception, though somewhat conducive to unfounded pride.

Though he was careful to preach humility, this species of pride swelled in every fold of the Canon's evangelical surplice and Protestant black scarf, as he came into church and walked with erect and stately carriage past the 'Communion table' to his stall. To have bent his head in its direction ever so slightly would have seemed to him undignified in a dignitary of the Church. 'Thank Heaven, I am not as some other clergy are,' rustled the well-starched, snowy folds of his ample vestment. 'I wear no cope nor chasuble. I have a holy horror of cross, candles, and incense. I avoid fasting as a snare of the devil. And, as for alms, though no one can say I have ever refused a soup-ticket to a poor and virtuous woman, or a job of work to a man who has proved himself, to my satisfaction, to be in need of it, I decline to pauperise my people, or rob Peter to pay Paul.' Then, having thus mutely proclaimed his principles, and shown forth his light before men, the Rector of Hatherlea, rustled to his knees, covered his face in his raiment, and said 'Amen.'

Nor must we judge him too severely. For, after all, he was, very possibly, no more of a conscious hypocrite than many another, both priest and layman. For he fully believed in himself, and in the integrity of his profession and principles. Thus he was no conscious deceiver; for he began by deceiving himself, which, as we have said before, is the most innocent sort of deception, though, may be, the most dangerous, especially for one of his sacred calling. For what man can pull the mote out of his brother's eye when he is blinded by a beam in his own? If he went on to deceive others it was, also, in ignorance, so far as the simple were concerned. Maria Williamson, for instance, thought the Canon a saint, and modelled herself upon him to the

best of her ability. But, though Maria took sanctimoniousness for sanctity, the mistake did her no great harm. She was too humble and devout by nature in any way to resemble her model, except, perhaps, in narrowness of views.

It is men like Gilbert Clavering who receive damage from the Canon Heskeths of this world. They are keenly alive to the defects of their spiritual pastors, and religion suffers grievously in their eyes from the shortcomings of its ministers. In this instance, the saying is but too true that there are no greater enemies of the Church than her own clergy.

Feeling as he did about his pastor, it is no wonder that Gilbert concerned himself little about him, from the time he entered church to the moment when service ended. He let his eyes and his thoughts wander at will, especially during the sermon, to that place in the choir-stalls where the Canon's daughter stood as precentor in her white Sunday gown. For Hatherlea Church, among its many other possessions, was proud of its 'mixed' choir; and white gowns in summer and black ones in winter for its female members were considered the happiest substitute for the surplice and cassock of more 'advanced' churches. In this respect, at least, Hatherlea had some excuse for its complacency. For the music was decidedly good, and the singing in better style than is usually found in village churches. Both male and female leaders, in the persons of organist and precentor, were possessed of taste and knowledge sufficient for their task, and had succeeded in inspiring their subordinates with a real *esprit de corps*—no easy matter with material at once so unresponsive and inflammable as the members of a choir.

It was always a real pleasure to Gilbert, both for æsthetic and sentimental reasons, to hear Evelyn's sweet, round alto, backing rather than leading the singing of psalm, hymn, and canticle. It seemed to fill the spaces left by the less

liquid voices, and to bear up the minstrelsy altogether, as on angels' wings, above any danger of flatness or lagging pace.

Nor was his eye less satisfied than his ear. There was something in the sweet, strong face which inspired him equally with the voice. For Evelyn's expression quite unconsciously revealed the whole-hearted absorption with which it was her nature to throw herself into everything that she cared to undertake. So might a seraph look, thought poor infatuated Gilbert Clavering, in the ranks of the heavenly choir. But, truth to tell, Evelyn Hesketh, good girl though she was, was far below the seraphs. She was not even an ordinary angel, except in unprejudiced eyes. Her stepmother, Lady Margaret, gave her a very different character; for there were many things—ay, and useful ones—which she did not care to undertake. These she either absolutely refused, or, if her position as only daughter of the Rectory forced them into her unwilling hands, she did them so half-heartedly, and with so bad a grace, as to merit the complaint of the Canoness that 'Evelyn is sometimes absolutely possessed.' For Evelyn in the choir, and Evelyn in ordinary life, were very different beings.

But though stepmothers may see the distinction, lovers do not. And, accordingly, not Gilbert Clavering alone, but Claude Meredith as well, beheld only the angel behind the woman, that Sunday morning in Hatherlea parish church.

It was not long before the old adorer, in his place to the south of the nave, noticed the eyes of the new adorer, from the Clavering pew to the north, straying to the same point as his own. The object of their adoration, it is true, seemed equally unconscious of the worship of either pair of eyes; though, eyes being possessed of a magnetic quality, it may be doubted whether their unconsciousness was unassumed. But, from the moment that the adorers became conscious of

each other's common point of view, their looks occasionally left the choir to watch each other across the aisle, much as two dogs who see a bone in the distance are each on the alert against a move in that direction by his rival.

When the sermon began, Evelyn Hesketh, for the first time, allowed herself a look down the church. It was a very fleeting one, as she was wont to sternly reprove such roving looks in the members of her choir. But when one is conscious that two pair of eyes are converging in one's direction, it is next to impossible not to look up some time, even when one is in church and a model of behaviour to others. Perhaps those two facts make it still more difficult to resist the impulse, on the theory of the extra sweetness of stolen waters. At any rate, Evelyn hazarded a look while the congregation was settling down into the attitude of resignation which is common to most congregations under a similar affliction. Not that Canon Hesketh was a bad preacher; he was only a perfunctory one. And when a man feels himself under the necessity of saying something at considerable length, and has nothing very particular to say—nothing, indeed, which could not be very much better said in a quarter of the time—his discourse is usually an infliction. And, alas, for the cause of religion, of such are sermons in general.

Evelyn Hesketh's erring look was noted neither by her choir nor by the majority of the congregation. But, nevertheless, her error was not undiscovered, being returned with interest into her own bosom. For those other two pairs of straying eyes instantly encountered hers, and the shock of the contact was such as to cause her to tingle with embarrassment during all the rest of the service. In vain did she recall her wanderers to their duty, carefully fixing them upon the chubby cherub's head which adorned the stall in front of her. The tide of crimson which flowed at

the contact over neck and face refused to ebb again till the last 'Amen' was sung, and choir, and priest, and people were free to disperse, with the comfortable assurance that, even had nothing more tangible been gained, they had done their duty, which is always 'something,' and a greater 'something' than the world in general is ready to allow. For, at any rate, they had paid to their Creator a portion of what they owed Him ; and if, through the shortcomings of His steward, they had received 'fashionless' husks in return, instead of the bread which He intended, it is, even in the case of spiritual things, often 'more blessed to give than to receive.'

Gilbert Clavering was one of the first to leave the church. He generally was, for it was his custom after service on Sundays to make his way round to the little door whence a gravelled path led up to the small white wicket, which was the private entrance from the Rectory garden.

There was a certain grey altar-tomb, standing a little aslant on four stone legs under a shady chestnut, on which 'Weston's agent' was wont to sit, watching for the appearance of the Canon and his staff.

On this convenient seat Gilbert sat down, as usual. He struck a match, also as usual, across the worn letters forming the name of one 'Thomas Lunn, a loving father and dutiful son,' whose bones rested beneath, and proceeded to light his pipe.

Half filled, he would just have time to smoke it out, as he calculated, before priest and wardens and choir appeared. For there had been 'a collection' that morning, and coins, especially small ones, take time to count. Moreover, by the sounds of music from within the church he judged that the singers were being put through their paces for an anthem, announced as a special attraction at evening service.

'It's a blessing that colonial fellow doesn't know she comes out this way,' thought Gilbert, with comfortable complacency, as he began to puff. 'There's *some* good in being first in the field, at any rate ; one learns the tactics.'

He leaned his back against the trunk of the horse-chestnut and waited with the patience of one who is sure of his reward. The sun was hot ; he was somewhat weary, and the shade, like Epps's Cocoa, was 'grateful and comforting.'

The great green leaves hung limp between his head and the burning blue of the mid-day sky. He looked up lazily, and sent some wreaths of pale blue smoke between the edges of the five fingers into which each leaf was spread, thinking how 'jolly' the sunshine looked as it filtered through the green. The music came to his ears, now loud, now soft : 'Oh, rest in the Lord !'—he could hear the words quite plainly—'and He shall give thee thy heart's desire.'

' " His heart's desire "—would that, indeed, be given to him ?' wondered poor Gilbert. If so, he would give something in return. What should it be ? Something to the church—a new organ, perhaps, if that were not beyond his means ; something, anyhow. He had heard of such votive offerings. Well, he would vow one himself, if—'Rest'—aye, it was sweet to rest ; he had felt so restless and ill at ease of late. Gilbert shut his eyes.

If he had not been a lover waiting for the coming of his lady-love, one might even say that he dozed. But that would seem a disloyalty—a piece of unromantic prose quite out of place under the circumstances. But, whether or not, the opening of the door and the sudden appearance on the scene of a troop of singers and church officials, with the Canon himself at their head, came quite as a surprise

to Gilbert. He jumped up hurriedly, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and stared, as though he had not been expecting them all the while.

'Ah, good morning, Clavering,' said the Canon blandly. 'Beautiful weather, isn't it? You'll come to lunch? Oh, you're looking for Evelyn? Well, I'm afraid you won't see her to-day. She went out of church by the west door—had to go with some jelly to old Betty Martindale, I believe; and then she's due at the Hall for lunch. What, you won't come? Well, good-day. I'm late, and my lady doesn't like waiting.'

He hustled through the wicket-gate into the Rectory garden and disappeared from sight.

'Oh, rest in the Lord!'—what, was the organist at it still, even though the choir was gone?

Gilbert Clavering bit his moustache savagely, and clenched his hand, as he strode among the graves and made haste to leave the churchyard. But the sound of the organ followed him; it seemed to call after him those words in which, but now, he had taken comfort, in a tone of mockery. For, happening to glance towards the bridge, he caught sight of a white dress and a grey checked suit in close juxtaposition. The wearers were standing together, with their elbows upon the parapet, looking attentively at the water, and neither seemed in a hurry to move. 'And He shall give thee thy heart's desire.' I am afraid that Gilbert Clavering swore, as he turned his back upon a sight which threatened the destruction of his cherished hopes.

'His heart's desire!' Instead of being given, it was to be taken from him at a stroke. What a fool he had been about that votive offering, thought the man in his bitter disappointment. If this fellow, Meredith, by simply lifting up his finger, was to win the wife for whom he, Gilbert,

had been willing to give up the world, the flesh, and the devil, simply that he might be fit to receive the blessing of her love, then there was no justice left either in earth or heaven.

Poor fellow ! Like most of us, when we are smarting under a similar trial, he did not see that 'justice' had absolutely nothing to do with the business. For the granting of a desire is a favour, not a due.

CHAPTER XIV

MEREDITH IS SWEEPED OFF HIS FEET

Such a heady current !—SHAKESPEARE : *Henry IV.*

CLAUDE MEREDITH, meantime, had been in no hurry to leave the church. He watched the choir and the Canon make their stately retirement in one direction, while the congregation withdrew in the other, before leaving his seat. It was not till he thought that Evelyn Hesketh might be expected outside that he followed the people into the churchyard.

The Hall party was already gone when he reached the gate. He could see Mrs. Clavering's long black veil waving in the air which rose from the river, as she crossed the bridge, with her red-headed boy by her side. He could see the tall and the short Miss Williamson following, their parasols bobbing at unequal elevations above their heads. Evelyn he did not see.

But the failure in nowise troubled him. He knew she was coming to lunch, for Mrs. Clavering had told him. He had only to wait a little and she was certain to appear ; for there was no other approach to the Hall excepting by the bridge. On the bridge, accordingly, he took his stand, leaned his elbows on the parapet, fixed his eyes on the dusty white road which intersected the village, and waited patiently. And, after a very few minutes, he had his reward.

The white-clad figure of the choir-leader came through the churchyard gate, stopped for a moment to take a covered

basket from the hand of a waiting maid-servant, and then passed on to the bridge.

Whether she saw him or not, to begin with, Claude was uncertain, for the sun was in her eyes. But, whether or not, she started a little when he came forward, with doffed hat and eager greeting, and the rosy colour, which he thought so becoming, showed in her young cheeks. There was a light in her eyes, moreover, as she lifted them frankly to his face, which Meredith was glad to see ; for it told him that, if a little startled, she was also pleased.

‘ Yes, I heard you had come back,’ she said in answer to his question. ‘ You must be glad to get out of London ? ’

‘ I am. Hatherlea is very preferable at this time of year. It’s only the poor folks that can’t help themselves who stay in town for July and August. I’d never have gone had I had my own way, Miss Hesketh.’

The words were conventional enough ; but there was something in the tone, and in the eager look of the man’s blue eyes that gave them a special significance. The girl’s heart beat a little quicker under her white dress, and her colour deepened.

‘ I’m going to a cottage outside the village, with some dinner for a sick woman,’ she said, with evident effort to appear unembarrassed. ‘ We shall meet, I suppose, at lunch ? ’

‘ Yes,’ he said, ‘ but don’t go yet ; you’re hot and tired——’ He looked at her flushed cheeks, as he made the remark, till Evelyn grew absolutely crimson. ‘ It must be hard work leading a choir. There’s such a nice air rising from the river ; just turn round a moment, and let’s enjoy it while we can. There’ll be none when we’re off the bridge.’

There was something constraining in his manner, and Evelyn found herself doing as she was told without so much as a question. But this did not hinder a feeling of irritation

on her part—the natural revolt of the still free woman against the masterful domination of the man.

What did he mean by looking at her with such an air of proprietorship, and making her uncomfortable by remarking on her looks? It was a freedom to which Evelyn was unaccustomed, in the world in which she lived; Gilbert would never have done it. But then, the ways of the colonies are not as English ways; and what would be resented in a Briton might be excused in a Colonial. This was, perhaps, why Evelyn submitted without a word to Meredith's advice, and consented to cool her hot cheeks beside him in the air from the river Tyne.

But the cooling process was brief; for it presently occurred to the Canon's daughter that her position was rather conspicuous, and that remarks might be made in the village likely to lead to gossip, if she remained where she was any longer.

This reflection undid all the good of the breeze. She felt her cheeks grow hot again, and it was with almost an irritable movement that she took her arms from the parapet and picked up her basket.

'This is sheer waste of time, Mr. Meredith,' she said sharply. 'It's nearly half a mile to Betty Martindale's; and if I'm to get there and back before lunch there must be no more dawdling.'

Claude looked at the ruffled girl with rather a quizzical smile.

'Oh, very well,' he said easily, 'let's be off. But there's plenty of time, and no occasion to hurry. It's only just struck twelve, and Mrs. Clavering's lunch is not till 1.15. Only a mile to walk, you say? We shall do it easy, and be at the Hall with twenty minutes to spare.'

We shall do it, he said. So he meant to come with her! Evidently he did; for, when they got to the

turning, Meredith strolled on by his companion's side, without so much as a pause.

Evelyn felt vexed and embarrassed. As she turned from the river to begin her walk she had caught sight of the landlord of the 'Hatherlea Arms' and Snaith, the village tailor, coming on to the bridge from the church side; and she had noticed a look in their faces which annoyed her considerably. Had she heard the remarks which the pair exchanged, she would have had still more cause for annoyance. Said the landlord, with a grin, to the tailor:

'Thore's t' same chap fra' t' colonies who was stoppin' at wor place, a while syne. He's sair ta'en up wi' wor Miss Evelyn, seemin'-ly.'

'Ay,' said the tailor, 'Ah guess he's gamin' tor cut oot Maistor Clavering. He kens a bit guid stuff when he sees it, and he's nut t' lad tor let t' moths whittle awa' what he meit be wearin', by leavin' it ower lang on't shelf. Think ye she'll tak' him, landlord?'

'Ah bet ye she will, Snaith! If t' lad means business, t' lass 'll be ready to gan intor portnership. Miss Evelyn isn't t' wumman tae waste hor time, crackin' on't brig wi' a chap, o' Sunday mornin', if her heart isn't set that way. Man! It taks luvie tor move a wise-like body off the lines. And see t' reid in hor feace!'

The men laughed good-naturedly, and watched the pair in whom they were interested, till neither white gown nor checked suit could any longer be seen.

But, though Evelyn could not hear them, the red in her cheeks glowed none the less. What did this man mean by attracting attention to her and insisting on walking by her side, without so much as a 'with your leave,' or 'by your leave'? She wished he would go; no, she didn't. She *liked* to have his company, she could not but own it, though it *did* make her so uncomfortable. She had missed

him while he was away ; though, till his return, she had hardly known what it was she missed. Still, if he meant nothing——

Evelyn turned cold at the thought, and then suddenly hot again. For her companion, who had walked by her side in silence since they had left the village behind them, had turned to her with a smile and 'It's good to see you again, Miss Hesketh !'

What was she to say to such a remark as this ? Evelyn could not tell, and so she said nothing.

'I wanted you all the time I was away. Do you know that ?' he said again ; and, this time, his eyes sought hers with such a look of comfortable satisfaction in them, as to set the girl tingling in every vein. 'Do you know that ?' he repeated, as though bent on an answer.

'No ; how should I !' she said in reply, striving hard to seem cool and unconcerned.

'Nevertheless, you *do* know it,' he answered with confidence. And then he stopped suddenly, and kicked a stone out of his path. They had encountered a pair of village lovers, sauntering, arm-in-arm, in the lane, and the sight of these had come as the sight of a finger-post to the other pair of companions.

Whither were they straying ? This was a lover's lane. Were they, also, following the road to matrimony ? She drew apart from her companion in dire confusion. He picked a branch of hazel from the hedge and began to strip it of its leaves.

Something seemed suddenly to have come between them. Evelyn remembered the evening when they had stood by the sunk fence in the Rectory garden ; Meredith had gone almost as near to love-making on that occasion, and had, all at once, pulled himself up, just as he was doing now. What sudden thought had come to check the words upon

his lips? She lifted her head proudly and tried to pass him, though her heart had suddenly dropped, like a bounding shuttlecock, to the ground.

‘Betty Martindale’s cottage is just round the corner,’ she said coldly; ‘I needn’t keep you, Mr. Meredith.’

He moved aside to let her pass without a word. Nevertheless, when she had left her jelly and spent a minute or two by the old woman’s bedside, and was back again in the lane, there was Meredith, just where she had left him, evidently waiting for her return. For he was sitting on the bank under the shade of a young beech-tree which grew in the hedge, industriously peeling his hazel-wand.

Evelyn started when she saw him, and the tell-tale blood rushed to her face. He looked at her closely, too closely to please her; and then, getting leisurely to his feet, strolled along beside her, still whittling his stick.

It was hot, even in that shady lane. The sunbeams peeped through the foliage and made dazzling patterns upon the path. No air seemed able to follow them in, for every leaf hung lifeless. Evelyn felt as though she were stifling. Meredith seemed to know it, for he suddenly said:

‘You’re hot and tired. Here’s a nice tree-trunk, just in the right place. Let’s sit down.’

‘No!’ she said hurriedly, and tried to pass, ‘there’s no time.’

‘Oh, yes, there is—plenty!’ was the unruffled answer. ‘I’ve just looked at my watch; it’s only half-past twelve. Sit down.’

He laid his hand on the girl’s arm, and again she yielded under his compelling influence. They sat in the shade: she with her eyes on the ground and her pulses beating a rapid march; he watching the coming and going of the rich colour in the round, soft cheek.

Two little field-mice came out of their hole and peeped

at them with bright, shy eyes. A pair of finches in the branches overhead went on hopping about unmoved. The place was so quiet and warm, and this human pair seemed to have it as much to themselves as the beasts and birds. What would he not give to have this girl always beside him, thought Meredith, as he studied her face. He saw how it flushed beneath his gaze, and the sight told its tale. Was it his fault that he was not a rich man? Must he let go what he might—as that face told him—have for the asking, merely because he was poor? Yes!—No!—Meredith's resolution, never a very firm one, began to falter. The sight of what he desired, its nearness to him, began to turn his brain and inflame his heart.

Evelyn had put down her empty basket; her firm, white hands, which, as often with her, were minus gloves, were clasped upon her knees. Meredith saw how tightly the fingers were interlaced, as though to check the trembling. He longed to take one in his. He let his eyes rest on them till the longing got the better of him, and passion mastered prudence. He stretched out his own hand, divided the other pair, and made a prisoner of the one which was nearest.

She tried to draw it away, for maidenly pride still made shift to fight with this masterful appropriation. But he held it fast, and, presently, it ceased to struggle. He looked again at the drooping face, and surprised a tear on the golden lashes. That did for prudence.

'Don't!' he said suddenly; 'don't; I'm not worth it.'

But she snatched her hand from his at the words, and sprang to her feet.

'I don't know what you mean, Mr. Meredith,' cried the girl, in her impetuous fashion, though her head was whirling and her heart beating so that she could scarcely see.

Perhaps, had she not so rebelled and defied him, the man would simply have told her the truth, how that 'he

would an' he could,' and so forth. But, though Claude Meredith was capable of calculation, there were times when his senses snatched the reins out of the hands of reason and bolted with the car which contained his plans. Let him but think that what he wanted most was about to escape from his possible grasp, and his head was gone entirely.

'Yes, you do, Evelyn; you know what I mean well enough,' he cried, striding after her and laying a detaining hand on her arm. 'I—I care for you. And you—yes, by Heaven, I believe you care for me! There—it's out at last, whatever may come of it.'

At the touch of his hand Evelyn had stopped dead. She could not, for the life of her, have gone another step. His passionate outburst sent the blood galloping through her veins, and she was trembling in every limb. Yes, it was 'out at last' with a vengeance, on *his* part, at least.

As for Meredith, he stood looking at her with his heart in his eyes. He did not seem to think an answer necessary, just then. His handsome face was alight with passion, but it was a passion which was unmingled with suspense. Had Evelyn Hesketh seen it, it is quite possible that her pride might have taken fire. But she did not, for her eyes were upon the ground; she was waiting for what was to happen next.

What really happened was an anticlimax—one of those ludicrous incidents which, when tension is at its height, sometimes brings it down with a run. A red parasol came bobbing round a corner of the lane, and a high-keyed voice said cheerfully: 'Ah! *here* you are; I thought I should find you in this direction; and I came to tell you that lunch will be at *one*, instead of a quarter past, as Maria is taking a class at two. You've only *just* time to get back before the gong sounds. Now *do* hurry up, or cook's good things will be all spoilt!'

Miss Teresa Williamson, who was holding the parasol before her eyes to avoid the glare of the sun, wheeled round and placed herself serenely between the couple, who had started asunder at her coming, blissfully unconscious that she had spoilt a dish of Cupid's own concoction, of much more importance to those who had begun to taste it than all the good things of the Hatherlea Hall kitchen.

Had her eyes been opened to see what the sun and her parasol had combined to hide from them, had her ears been opened to hear the silent anathemas of the pair between whom she was walking, Miss Teresa Williamson could not have failed to be sorely uncomfortable. But here, if ever, was a case in which it could be truly said that 'ignorance is bliss.'

Accordingly, that lady chatted gaily on, never so much as noticing the silence and preoccupation of her companions. And the pair, whose love-making she had interrupted, had time, the one to cool her hot cheeks and quiet her beating heart, the other to cool down also, though after a different fashion, before putting in an appearance at the luncheon-table.

'After all,' thought Evelyn, 'it doesn't much matter. He will easily find an opportunity to tell me the rest, and I shall have time to think over my answer.'

Thought Meredith, after the first feeling of exasperation had passed : 'It's as well for me that the old woman stopped the way. I was fairly carried off my feet. In another moment I should have been swept away beyond recall. As it is——' But he did not then conclude the reflection. He, also, could now take his time ; and time is everything to one of Claude Meredith's character. Only given time, and a thousand things may come to alter one's course on the stream of life.

CHAPTER XV

A MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

'The boy,' saith he, 'hath got his own,
But sore has been the fight.'

JEAN INGELow: *Strife and Peace.*

No king in this world was ever more proud or happy than the little heir of Hatherlea when, on the morning of the great Twelfth, he jumped from his bed and dressed himself for his first shoot on his own grouse moors.

It was Monday morning, the day after Claude Meredith had 'made a fool of himself' (as to himself, in cold blood, he called it) with Evelyn Hesketh. The sun shone down from a clear blue sky; a light west wind just stirred the leaves and rippled the river—it was a day to rejoice the heart of a sportsman. But none rejoiced more than that of the boy, whose first day of real grown-up sport it was to be. He had got his way, for one thing—a very substantial cause for rejoicing—in spite of the objections of 'Cousin Gillie.' In fact, had he but known it, those objections, far from hindering, had helped him to his desire. For Mrs. Clavering resented 'Cousin Gillie's' interference, and had sacrificed certain motherly tremors which, otherwise, might have caused her to keep her son at home, on purpose to show her independence.

'Mr. Meredith says I can shoot *quite* nicely, mother,' the boy had proudly declared, when, on the Sunday evening, the 'pros and cons' had been finally discussed between mother and guardian. 'He thinks I shall be a first-rate shot

in a very short time. I've improved so much since he's been giving me lessons, haven't I, sir ?'

'Indeed, Mrs. Clavering, he "*feus vara weel*,"* as your keeper says. I think you may safely give your permission for him to go with us to-morrow. We shall be quite a small party you see—only Mr. Clavering and myself, Mr. Tinniswood and Dr. Woodward, besides the keepers. The boy will be all right with us.'

'You're sure I may trust him to you ?' murmured Mrs. Clavering, in her most dove-like voice. 'He's very precious you know—the only son of his mother, and she a widow ! You promise to be *very* careful, Bertie ? Really, I don't know *what* Gilbert will say when he sees you !'

'Oh, never mind what *he* says !' exclaimed the boy disdainfully ; 'he's got nothing to do with it.'

'Does he know you're going ?'

'Rather not ; unless *you've* told him, Mr. Meredith ? But I'm sure you wouldn't spoil sport.'

Meredith laughed, though, truth to tell, he was not in much of a laughing mood, that morning. He had lain awake good part of the night, thinking of the predicament into which he had got himself. Not that he regretted the discovery that Evelyn's heart was touched : the knowledge caused him a great deal of secret satisfaction ; for his own heart had never been so much moved by any woman before. He admired her immensely. He loved her also—though not as did Gilbert Clavering. And it was a very distinct satisfaction to think that he had found favour in the eyes of a woman whose favour was considered a prize. Especially did he exult that he had, as he called it, 'cut out' another man, whom he regarded with antipathy. But this satisfaction was heavily handicapped by the feeling that he had, as he called it, 'got himself into a hole.' He had

* Makes a good beginning.

said at the same time too much and too little—too much if he could not marry the girl ; and how he was to do this in his present position he did not know. He had only to lay the state of his finances before her father to be dismissed ‘with a flea in his ear,’ for daring to speak of love without money to support it ; of that he felt too sure. Yet, was he free to go his way without further explanation ? Scarcely. Evelyn would certainly expect him to complete the interrupted proposal. He could not in honour leave her without offering some explanation, even if he wished it ; which, from one point at least, he certainly did not. For, however much he might regret having allowed emotion to run away with prudence, the experience had been of the sweetest, and the girl now seemed to him dearer and more desirable than ever. The worst of it all was that, according to the Miss Williamsons, he was considered to be a rich man. And of the rich much is expected which is not looked for in the poor. Had he come to Hatherlea in the character of a poor man, Evelyn and her people would have known what they were about. As it was, through no fault of his own, he was here on false pretences.

It was an awkward position, truly, for any man to be in, and Meredith might well be excused for feeling uncomfortable.

He was so silent and irresponsible, during the drive to the moors, that Bertie soon ceased to direct his lively remarks to a companion on whom they were so evidently thrown away, and bestowed them on the keeper instead, who occupied a back seat in the Hall dog-cart. The drive to the moors was not long. In that part of Tynedale, hills and valleys are never far apart, and green grass and purple heather are for ever stretching a hand into the other’s preserves.

In half an hour from the time of starting the dog-cart had drawn up before the ling-thatched cottage, which served

as a shooting-box to the Hatherlea moors, a portion of which had been exempted from the lease which disposed of the rest to a wealthy Manchester man.

The little party of guns which, at Mrs. Clavering's invitation, had met for the slaughter of grouse, was already assembled, when the Hall contingent drove up. It was a small party, as Meredith had said, numbering only three—Gilbert Clavering, Tinniswood, the family solicitor, and Woodward, the family doctor—all persons whom the local Mrs. Grundy could not possibly object to, even under 'the melancholy circumstances.' For Mrs. Clavering had a profound respect for Mrs. Grundy, and would not for the world have given occasion for any of her adversaries to blaspheme while widow's weeds preserved their pristine blackness.

'Oh, no, we are having no big shoots this year!' she had said plaintively, in answer to an inquiry. 'How could you think I would be so heartless? Only a little family gathering for dear Bertie's sake—*quite* among ourselves, you know—not a single stranger. As Todd, the keeper, says, it does not do to let the beasts of the field multiply against one, even when one *is* a widow. And I suppose he's right; otherwise the grouse might have lived for me. But no one can say a word, the way it's been arranged.'

No doubt the business was beautifully arranged; for, except so far as the feelings of the grouse were concerned, no others could possibly be hurt. Nor was anyone a loser by the arrangement; except, perhaps, the grouse again. For if the guns were few, they were, most of them, good shots; so that neither the larder at Hatherlea Hall, nor those of its friends, not to speak of the shops of the dealers—of which, of course, one does not speak on such occasions—were likely to go unsupplied.

Considerations such as these, however, cannot be sup-

posed to have presented themselves to the grief-laden mind of a new-made widow like poor Mrs. Clavering. It was, doubtless, a dispensation of Providence that, as in the case of the lilies, while taking no thought for things so sordid, her interests were not neglected.

Gilbert Clavering's face darkened visibly when he caught sight of his young cousin by Meredith's side on the front-seat of the Hatherlea dogcart. Beyond a muttered something under his breath, however, he made no remark. Only the look which he exchanged with Meredith was like a challenge on both sides.

Dr. Woodward was not so reserved. 'Hello, young squire!' cried the family doctor, an elderly man with a gaunt frame and hatchet face, who had the reputation for a rough tongue in the country-side. 'You here? It's early days, isn't it, to join your elders in slaughtering the innocents? It's hardly a ploy for bairns. But there! Ye're our host, I suppose, and I must say no more,' he added, as he saw the boy flush. 'Only take care of him, Clavering. "Children and fools"—you know.'

The last words were spoken aside to Gilbert, and were accompanied by a dig in the ribs, which made the land-agent wince.

'Don't talk to me. I've nothing to do with it,' he said testily, though in a carefully lowered key. 'All that's been taken out of my hands; I've no more responsibility in the matter than you have.'

'Eh? Ye don't say so?' remarked the doctor. 'Ah, well, then, let's make the best of it. We won't quarrel with our bread-and-butter, even if it's got to be eaten in the nursery. It's over fine a day to waste in murmurs. Now then, Mr. Keeper—what's the order of battle? Put us at our posts, and then a fair field and no favour—eh, Tinniswood?'

'Ready, aye, ready !' replied the dapper lawyer, whose shooting get-up was meant to be the admiration of the party. Only, somehow, it wasn't. For, with the exception of Meredith, whose London-made suit of heather-mixture had been got for the occasion, the rest of the grown-up sportsmen were in the oldest and most weather-worn tweeds, and felt themselves as much superior as old hands usually do in comparison with new.

'Come, Maister Bertram,' said the old keeper. 'Ye an' me'll stan' togither. We'll pit Maister Clavering on wor left, an' Maister Meredith on wor right. Doctor an' 'Torney can tak' the twa wings. Noo, hinny, not a word ! Grooses hez maist awfu' sharp ears, an' they're comin'—eh, look oot, ma lad, an' fire when Ah tell ye.'

The heart of the novice was beating so fast and so loud, and his eyes were so dazzled with excitement, that, as he crouched behind the breastwork of turf where the keeper had placed him, he could neither hear nor see distinctly. The gun, which he held in readiness, trembled in his grasp. He was dimly aware of a crowd of dark spots coming up the wind between himself and the sun, of a whir of wings and a startled chorus of '*Beck-beck ! Quebec !*' Then, with a flash all along the line, '*crack-crack-rattle !*' went the guns—his own, presumably, with the rest ; only of this he was not quite sure. Black spots fell from the air into the heather. Others went blundering and screaming over his head. And before, as it seemed, he had time to get his breath, his companions had risen to their feet, and the opening drive was over.

'Todd ! Todd ! Did I shoot one ? I *think* my gun went off, didn't it ? Oh, do let me see if I've killed a bird !'

Like a young savage taking a scalp for the first time in his life, the boy threw down his gun and rushed, with a

whoop, into the open, where the victims of the battue were lying dead or quivering upon their native heath. Fully a dozen beautiful children of the heather had fallen to the six guns, and of these Bertie was certain that he had killed the very finest cock of all. If his gun had had two barrels he would certainly have claimed the second best as well. But, 'With a toy like this, I *couldn't* have done better, could I, Mr. Meredith?' he proudly asked his teacher, holding up before him the bronze-plumaged bird which he claimed as his victim. 'You must tell mother to buy me a proper breech-loader before we go out again, and then I'll bring down as many as—as Cousin Gillie. *He's* killed the most of anybody, hasn't he, Todd?'

The keeper smiled discreetly. It was not his practice to exalt any one of his 'guns' above the other, a diplomatic reserve which, on many a Twelfth, he had found to be the best policy for his pocket's sake.

'It's a bit early to coont wor chickens, Maister Bertie,' he said, with his richest Northumbrian burr. 'Wor bag is yet to mak'. Noo, gentlemen, ye'd best be gannin' t'ither side o' yon screens; the beaters, oot bye'll, be sendin' thae birds back.'

And, accordingly, the act, with its accompanying music, began, *da capo*, from the opposite side of the stage, with a corresponding result.

In the excitement and zest which killing brings to the average man, even Clavering and Meredith forgot for a while, not only their jealousies, but the causes of them.

It would, indeed, have been a very black grievance which could have shut in a sportsman, on such a day, from the influences of sun and wind, of space and freedom, of the sights and scents and sounds of such a playground as this, on which every man could stay to his heart's content, and find his hunger grow ever keener to feed on what he slew.

By the time that the shooting-box was once more reached, where a cart, which had brought the lunch, was in waiting to carry away the game, the spirits of the party had reached a good average height, stiffness had worn off, and, for the time at least, even the image of Evelyn Hesketh had ceased to haunt the minds of her admirers.

Gilbert Clavering, indeed, had not for months felt so light-hearted. A cloud seemed to have lifted from off his mind. He forgot his vexation at the presence of his young cousin, and went so far as to compliment the boy on his prowess, which brought a flush of pleasure into Bertie's freckled face. He even cracked a joke with Todd, much to the latter's amazement; for Gilbert Clavering was more noted for his dourness than for his pleasantry among both equals and inferiors.

'What's coom tae Maister Clavering, Ah wonder?' thought the old man to himself, as he looked at the agent keenly from under his bushy eyebrows. 'If he wor ony ither gentleman but joost hissel', Ah wad say it was whusky. But he's not taen a thimbleful, sae it canna be that. Can t' Canon's lass hae gien him a smile, Ah wonder?'

Nor was wonder confined to old Todd. Others of the party shared the feeling, and, perhaps, none more so than Clavering himself. He had felt so long down-hearted that, to-day, he hardly knew himself in the guise of a cheerful man.

'Is it good fortune coming to meet me at last?' was his unspoken query; and he broke into a whistle, as he rose from luncheon, and took up his gun for the afternoon's sport.

'He's joost fey!' concluded Todd, whose mother was from over the Border. 'Guid send us a' safe hame!'

Then the massacre of the innocents, as Dr. Woodward had called the sport, began again more blithely than ever. But a time comes when even the shedding of blood brings

satiety, and, accordingly, about four o'clock in the afternoon, it was agreed among the 'guns' that such grouse as had escaped them should be left in peace till another day, unless, indeed, one should start up on the homeward way, absolutely asking to be shot.

'We'll keep our guns loaded till we're back at the shooting-box, won't we, Todd?' said the young master of the ceremonies, as he prepared to climb a wire fence which ran across the part of the moor where they then were. 'I say, what a grand day it's been! I never had a happier in all my life. Oh, I say, look out—there's the jolliest pack; don't let them get away!'

The boy, who was nearest the wires, fired, but only winged his bird, and, in his excitement, forgot all precautions and rules of sport, and threw himself over the fence in pursuit, right in front of the guns of his party. Old Todd was the first to see his danger, and called to the rest to hold their fire, making a frantic dash at Clavering, who happened to be nearest his young cousin.

'For God's sake, sir, look out!' he cried, trying to strike up the weapon; but it was too late, the trigger was already drawn. The hair's-breadth of space, the second of time, which often makes all the difference between life and death, was gone beyond control. There was a sharp cry—a fall—and something, which was not a grouse, lay quivering upon the heather.

CHAPTER XVI

‘WHILE THE CHILD WAS YET ALIVE’

Thy life is dear ; for all that life can rate
Worth name of life, in thee hath estimate.

SHAKESPEARE: *All's Well that Ends Well.*

DR. WOODWARD came out softly from the room which had been the old night-nursery at Hatherlea Hall, and shut the door behind him. There was a tear hanging from the lashes of his keen grey eye, and his thin lips were pressed together more tightly than usual.

The sun had already set, and twilight was creeping up the old oak stair, with a foot more noiseless than the doctor's own. A clock ticked on relentlessly, somewhere out of sight, and the homing rooks kept up a sleepy cawing, as they winged their way to their roosting places in the tall elms outside. All was so very quiet that no one would have thought that the wings of the dark Death Angel were hovering over the house, or that the sands from a little hour-glass, which he held poised within his hand, were swiftly running out.

So silent was it that, when one of the shallow stairs creaked beneath the doctor's descending foot, he drew in his breath with a sound of dismay, as though he had been guilty of breaking the peace.

As Dr. Woodward came to the first landing below the story containing the former nurseries, a figure reared itself from out of the shadows and stood in his way.

The waning light, solemn as the last look of a dying

man, fell aslant upon the figure through one of the staircase windows, revealing a haggard face and a pair of gleaming eyes, which reminded the doctor of those of a dog which he had once rescued from a trap. He scarcely recognised Gilbert Clavering, so changed was he within the last few hours. He looked years older than he had done in the afternoon. The man's lips moved as though he were speaking, but no sound came. He pointed up the stairs, and groaned. Then the doctor spoke.

'He's not dead yet,' he said shortly; 'not dead yet. But——' He stopped, and the tear escaped from his lashes and rolled down his cheek.

Dr. Woodward had stood by many a death-bed during the thirty years of his practice at Hatherlea Bridge, but no one had ever seen him shed a tear before. Gilbert Clavering watched the tear as it wound its way along a furrow which Time had driven, by no means straight, through the doctor's weather-stained cheek. It seemed to have a momentary interest for him, and a little relief came to his tortured mind as he speculated where it would fall. But the relief was quickly over. The doctor put up his hand and wiped away the tear, and then the fangs of that great serpent which feeds on the hearts of men, and which we call, indifferently, Agony and Anguish, set themselves more deeply yet upon him. He turned from the doctor with a moan.

'No hope?' he said, finding words at length—'none?'

Dr. Woodward stretched out a large hand and laid it kindly upon the shoulder which Clavering had turned his way.

'Nay,' he said huskily, 'it isn't for me to say the final word. "While there's life," you know. But, man, what's the use of blinking it? We've got to look things in the face. One says these things to the women; but men, like you and me, Clavering, take better to naked truth. I've

sent for Dr. Saville from Newcastle—it doesn’t do to neglect anything. But I see no chance for the lad ; in my opinion, he’ll be gone before the morning. Lord ! but it’s a pity. Such a fine little fellow ! But, there ; I’m forgetting. Forgive me, Clavering ; I’m a blundering old fool. There—there. For God’s sake, man, bear up ! It wasn’t your fault, you know.’

The old doctor blew his nose noisily, and clapped his companion upon the shoulder, with sincere though awkward sympathy. For Clavering had utterly broken down, and was shaking with strangled sobs.

Dr. Woodward tried to take his hand ; but Clavering drew it away.

‘No,’ he burst out, ‘you sha’n’t touch it ; there’s blood upon it. I’ve killed him, doctor ; killed him. Say what you will, his death is at my door. Oh, God ! God ! How shall I bear it ?’

Dr. Woodward was alarmed. He knew the danger when strong men, of reserved and quiet exterior, burst the barriers, as Clavering was doing ; and he did his best to check him by a show of severe authority.

‘This is folly, sir !’ he said, ‘sheer folly. It was pure accident which sent the boy in front of your gun. It might just as easily have been mine. No blame attaches to you, and you know it. If fault there be, it lies with those who allowed a child to take part in the amusements of grown men. Now, no more of this. Go home, take a glass of something hot, and go to bed. Stay, I’ll give you a draught to make you sleep. Now pull yourself together, and be a man, for God’s sake. Leave the weeping and wailing for that poor woman upstairs. I’ve had to give *her* something to keep her quiet ; she’d have sent that little flickering flame out at once, if I’d let her be. Hush ! they are calling me. Good-night.’

Dr. Woodward turned to go upstairs again, leaving Clavering alone in the gathering darkness.

He did not go home at once, as the doctor had intended. Instead of that he subsided again on to the oak settle, where he had been sitting before, and leaned forward, listening intently, as though all that remained in life for him were hanging on a sound. His ears followed every step of the doctor upon the creaking stair. He heard a subdued voice, a woman's—he knew whose it was—say, 'I thought I'd better tell you. He's stirred, and I think——'

The door shut, and for some time even the strained ears of the listener caught no more.

Time passed, and, with a mighty wheezing, the old clock on the stairs struck ten. Its efforts were hardly over when the door again opened and the doctor began to descend, groping his way in the unlighted stairway. He started a little as Clavering laid a hand upon his arm.

'You here still?' said the gruff voice. 'This is really beyond everything! Didn't I tell you to go home? Now come along with me. Any change? Well, there's been an interval of semi-consciousness; it makes no practical difference. I've given him an anodyne, and he's off again. There'll be no change at present. You may depend on me letting you know if you're wanted. Now, come along!'

The doctor had taken Clavering's arm and was leading him from the house and along the avenue, where the trees were sighing and stretching long waving fingers across the space of pale sky, which kept the rows apart.

'Will you come home with me?' asked the doctor presently. 'It's a bit far to your place at Brackenside.'

'Thank you. If you will just let me sit in your arm-chair till morning. I'd like to be on the spot.' He

spoke more calmly, though there was deep dejection in his voice.

The doctor felt relieved. ‘By all means,’ he said. ‘But there’s my sofa, which will be better still. You ought to sleep.’

‘If I can. No, I won’t take anything, thank you ; good-night.’

They had reached the house, into which the doctor had let himself in with his latch-key, his housekeeper having gone to bed. Dr. Woodward felt worn out. He had had a long day on the moors, and the demands made upon him by the sad catastrophe which had put an end to the sport had overtaxed his failing powers ; for he was past his seventieth year. Mixing a glass of hot whisky and water for himself, in which he vainly tried to get his guest to join, he gave the latter a rug, and, leaving him to himself, he mounted the stair to his own bedroom.

‘Poor lad,’ he murmured, ‘poor lad ; it’s hard lines for him. No wonder he’s cut up ; but I trust he’s over the worst.’

But the doctor was mistaken. The worst had not yet come for Gilbert Clavering. He did not lie down on the sofa, as he had been bidden to do, but paced up and down the narrow room till the east began to whiten with the dawn of a new day. Once or twice he stopped by the table which held the whisky bottle and the kettle and spirit lamp, looking wistfully at the former. But he stretched no hand towards it. ‘No,’ he said to himself, ‘no ; not yet. I dare not while the boy is still alive. Afterwards——’

He broke off and resumed his pacing. But, strong man though he was, he, also, was near the end of his powers. He felt broken with that worst of fatigue which comes from mental agony. Perhaps, as with the sufferer who is being

broken on the wheel, such exhaustion is in reality a mercy. At all events, it brings for a time the incapacity to suffer so keenly as the victim in full strength can be made to do.

As the pallid light of morning began to creep into the doctor's study, touching into visibility the pens and pipes and papers, the books and bottles which littered his table, Gilbert Clavering stopped his pacing at last, shivered a little, sighed, and, rolling himself in the doctor's rug, he stretched himself upon the horse-hair sofa and went fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE MORNING

Sleep, pretty bairn, and never know
 Who grudged and who transgressed ;
 Thee to retain I was full fain,
 But God He knoweth best !
 And His peace upon thy brow lies plain
 As the sunshine on thy breast.

JEAN INGELow : *Strife and Peace.*

A LIGHT burned all through that summer night in the old sleeping-nursery at Hatherlea Hall. It was carefully shaded ; but, even if it had not been, the child upon the bed would not have been disturbed, either by its light or by the shadows which it cast upon the wall. Walls, tables, window-seats—everything bespoke the boy who had inhabited it from babyhood. Pictures from the ‘Graphic’ and the ‘Illustrated London News’ almost covered the paper, most of them depicting battle and hunting scenes, varied by portraits of dogs and horses and of the principal leaders in the South African war. Stuffed birds, cases of butterflies and moths, cricket and tennis bats, fishing tackle—put up or thrown down, just anyhow or anywhere—were eloquent of boyish tastes for outdoor life ; and the books on the shelf—there were not many of them—were all tales of sport and adventure. On a chair lay the suit for the Twelfth, about the ordering of which Bertie Clavering had been so particular. The pretty grey shooting jacket, with its patch of leather on the shoulder for the gun to rest on, was stained with blood.

There was a stain of the same on the pillow which supported the head and shoulders of the motionless little figure upon the bed. He was lying as though asleep, but there was none of the healthy rose of slumber usual at his age in the small, death-white face, where the freckles stood out pathetically apparent—sun-spots which tell of long days in the open air, and have nothing to do with the sick-room. The eyes were shut, the blond lashes lying upon the pallid cheek. The wisps of carrot-red hair, which had been poor Bertie's abhorred distinction when he first entered school, were tossed upon the pillow. One little hand—freckled and tanned all over—rested, limp, upon the bedclothes. The other was stretched at arm's length across the pillow. In it, clasped so tightly that, without force, it could not be removed, was a tuft of grouse feathers.

On either side of the bed, their shadows moving on the wall as the air from the open window stirred the light upon the table, sat two women, silent watchers for the slightest change in the patient's face. One was the boy's old nurse, now district nurse for the village, a capable-looking woman of fifty, with a sensible face and wiry frame. The other—she was sitting with her face to the window and her shapely hands clasped upon her lap—was Evelyn Hesketh. The girl was pale, but perfectly composed, except that, now and then, a silent tear gathered in her pitiful eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks. But the shedding seemed quite unconscious, for she did not even put up a hand to wipe them away. The stillness of the room was intense. The breathing of the child upon the bed, though sadly feeble, could be distinctly heard, and the ticking of his watch—how proud poor Bertie had been of it!—upon the table, seemed absolutely disturbing. Evelyn got up at last, stole across the room, and put it into a drawer. 'It's nearly four o'clock,' she whispered, as she came back to her place.

'The doctor said he would come at five, if we didn't send before,' said the nurse in reply, using the same cautious tone.

Then silence fell again. A little pale grey light came into the sky above the tall elms ; birds began to twitter sleepily in the ivy. Then a quick patter came up the stairs, and something touched the nursery-door. The women looked at each other, but neither stirred. The slight sound was repeated ; then a whine followed.

'It's Warlock,' whispered Evelyn.

'Aye,' replied the nurse, 'they'll, likely, have forgotten to shut him up, and he'll have been off rabbiting since yesterday. He generally comes up in the morning when they let him out. At least, he used to when I lived here.' The whine came again, changing, presently, into a prolonged howl.

'What shall we do?' asked Evelyn ; 'he'll rouse the household, even if he doesn't disturb poor Bertie.'

'Yes,' answered the nurse ; 'I'll see if he'll follow me downstairs.'

But, no sooner was the door open, than the terrier rushed in and made for the bed, trying, by all the means in his power, to attract his master's attention. Failing in his efforts, he put up his fluffy grey nose and gave another piteous howl.

The nurse, in desperation, tried to lay hold of the creature to carry him away, but, as she grasped him, the figure on the bed stirred slightly, and a faint little voice said : 'Warlock ! Come here, lad.'

The dog broke from his captor, and, with a cry of delight, bounded upon the bed and began, with much tail-wagging, to lick his master's hand.

'Oh, Master Bertie, honey, don't ! He'll hort you, lambie. Let me take him away.'

'No, no ; let him stay. I want Warlock. Oh, nurse, what *is* the matter ? My back hurts—so much, and I can't move properly.'

The boy's faint voice turned into a moan of pain. The woman motioned to Evelyn to ring the bell. Then she sank on her knees beside the bed, and took the hand which was at liberty—for the dog was still licking the other—within her own. It was clammy cold.

'Hush, then, dearie !' she said caressingly. 'Don't take on, my lamb. We'll make him better soon. Tell them to go for the doctor at once,' she added, turning to her fellow-watcher.

'Oh, my back ! my back !' moaned the child. 'What is it, nurse ? And what's that on my pillow ? It looks like blood ! Did I get shot instead of the grouse ? Yes ; I kind of remember something. Then I'm wounded, am I not ?—like the soldiers in the war. Father got wounded, you know. No, I won't cry—I *won't*—I *won't*. Soldiers never do. But, oh, nursie, it hurts so much !'

'Yes, dearie ; yes, my lambie—but we'll make him better soon. Dr. Woodward's coming.'

'Is he ? Then I *must* be bad. I never had him but once—when I had scarlet-fever, you know. I nearly died then, didn't I ? But this is only a wound. Nursie, I'd like—I'd like to see Mr. Meredith. I want to hear about father—he got wounded too. But he—*died* !' The boy shuddered as with a sudden fear. 'Nursie,' he whispered, 'do you think I'll die too ?'

The cloudy blue eyes looked with startled pathos into the nurse's face. She turned hastily aside.

'Don't, lambie !' she said, trying hard to steady her voice. 'You mustn't talk like that. Be a good boy. Dr. Woodward will soon be here, *he*'ll make you better.'

'It's Mr. Meredith, I want,' was the fretful answer ;

'he'll tell me all about it. You always *did* tell lies, nurse, when I asked you questions you didn't want to answer!'

'Oh, Master Bertie, don't say that!' cried the poor woman, forgetting for the moment the manners of the sick nurse in the smart of the accusation. 'What, do you *really* want Mr. Meredith? Wouldn't you rather see your poor mamma?'

'No. It's too early—isn't it? Mother doesn't like to be woke up. Fetch Mr. Meredith. Is that you, Evie? It's funny to see you here when I'm still in bed! But never mind. *You'll* go for Mr. Meredith, I know. And, oh, be quick; it's hurting again—so badly!'

Evelyn Hesketh turned away. She could not refuse the request of the dying boy; yet how could she fetch Meredith? She did not even know where he slept, and if she did——

Her face burned at the thought; she had not so much as seen him since Sunday.

But the bell had roused the servants. She met a housemaid—fully dressed, as though she had sat up all night, but yawning in a way that betrayed an involuntary slumber—on the landing below.

'Send for Dr. Woodward at once,' said Evelyn, breathing quickly; 'Master Bertie is conscious. And—and tell Mr. Meredith he's asking for him.'

'Very well, miss,' answered the woman, hurrying downstairs.

Evelyn Hesketh stood for a moment, breathing hard. She put her hand to her beating heart, and turned to look out of the window, trying hard to steady herself. To be thinking of herself and Meredith at such a time as this! The very idea seemed shocking to her. And, yet, do what she would, all that night, the echo of his words, the look upon his face, as he stood beside her in the lane, had filled

her mind, not, indeed, to the exclusion of grief for Bertie—she had been conscious of that all the while—but as an undercurrent of sweetness tempering the bitterness of her grief. The staircase window looked eastward. The sky behind the black bar-work, made by the branches of the elms, was suffused with rosy light. The girl's eyes watched for the sunrise, which she knew must be close at hand. In spite of the cloud of sorrow which hung over the old house she was young enough to feel within her the hopefulness of the dayspring. With her, also, the future seemed bathed in rosy light; for her also the sun was about to rise. Surely, surely, death could have no power on such a morning as this! The little life upstairs, which had seemed last night to be ebbing like a tide, would turn and flow again with the coming of the sun. She could not believe it would be otherwise; for God was much too good.

‘Heaviness may endure for a night; but joy cometh in the morning.’

The words seemed whispered in her heart, as her eyes caught the first spark of the sunrise behind the branches of the elms.

When one is young and unacquainted with grief, like Evelyn Hesketh, such faith and hope are very strong. It is only as one grows older and more experienced that one learns that things seldom are shaped according to one's desire. Then, either one grows faithless and despairing; or else, by the ladder of experience, one climbs to a higher level, whence there is a wider view. After all, the faith and hope of the very young, beautiful though they doubtless are, belong to those childish things which the man or woman must outgrow. There are greater things than these for those who, like Job, can hold fast by God in spite of disappointment. For such, both faith and hope remain; but they wear another face, nobler and more virile than the

cherub features which smile upon us in our youth. We know that God is good, we do not only think so ; though He seem to slay us, we can keep our trust unbroken, sure that, though our eyes are holden, He is working out, through present pain, a greater and better happiness than could be ours had we the ordering of affairs. Though we tarry long in twilight, looking towards the east and waiting for the morning, we know that, some time, the sun of Hope must rise for all with healing on his wings ; a sun more large and glorious than childish eyes can look on—a sun which will shine on, ever more brightly, unto the perfect day. ‘ Though it tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come.’

The church clock across the river struck five. Evelyn counted the strokes, as they travelled through the spaces of quiet air, and fell on her listening ears. As the last went on its way, she heard a door beside her open, and Meredith appeared upon the landing. She turned quickly, the light of sunrise still in her golden eyes, her face as rosy as the morning.

Meredith started. He looked haggard and upset. His toilet had, evidently, been hastily made, and his eyes were restless and unsteady.

‘ Evelyn—Miss Hesketh,’ he said hesitatingly, ‘ *you* here ? I did not know. They told me the poor little chap wanted to see me. Is he—is he any better ?’

Evelyn felt her heart sink. This was not the man whose image had filled her heart, like sunshine, for the last forty hours. The agitation, which had shaken her when she first looked out of the window, had calmed down. She felt perfectly self-possessed now, though her heart was perceptibly heavier. The flush went out of her cheeks, and left her with all the paleness of a sleepless night.

‘ He’s conscious,’ she said quietly ; ‘ I don’t know whether he’s any better. Dr. Woodward has not come

yet. Yes, he wants to see you, poor little man. You'd better come at once.' She led the way upstairs.

Bertie Clavering was lying with his eyes upon the door ; the nurse had turned him that way at his own request. When he saw Meredith, a little wan smile came over the freckled face, and the blue eyes brightened.

'I'm glad you've come,' he said, in the small ghost of a voice which was all that remained to him. 'Sit down here and tell me about father. I want to hear what he did when he was wounded in the battle. I'm wounded too. It hurt *very* much a bit ago ; but I didn't cry, did I, nursie ? The pain's not so bad since you put on that stuff ; I can bear it *quite* well now,' he added almost cheerfully.

Meredith sat down in the chair where Evelyn had sat all through the night. She went to one beside the table, on which the light still burned, fighting feebly with the coming sunshine. Shading her face with her hand, she watched the bed with tired eyes.

She could see that Meredith was trembling. His mouth worked under the yellow moustache, and the hand which covered the boy's upon the counterpane shook visibly.

'How much he feels it !' she thought compassionately. 'Gilbert himself couldn't take it more to heart, though it was *he* who did it. I wonder he could bear to leave the house ; but there's something hard about him—there *must* be.'

She judged according to youthful judgment, than which there is nothing harder—its hardness is only equalled by its shallowness. But eyes accustomed to perpetual sunshine can see little in the dark ; only those who have themselves passed through the Valley of the Shadow can understand.

'Tell me about father,' repeated Bertie, presently, when he had waited awhile and got nothing in answer to his request.

But still there was no reply. That scene upon the veldt of which, of late, Meredith had lost sight, had risen

once more before him with painful vividness. He shuddered as he saw the look of the dying father reflected in the face of the child.

'Why don't you speak? Tell me—tell me!' said the querulous little voice.

Meredith struggled with the mental nausea which, even more than physical emotion, choked the words in his throat.

'He was—he was—very brave and patient,' he faltered at last.

'Of course!' interjected the boy with feeble contempt, 'all soldiers are. Did he say anything about me? I'd like to know.'

'Yes'—(Meredith felt a pang of remorse, as he recalled the words in which his dying friend had confided to him this child. How had he fulfilled that charge?) 'He said he wanted you to grow up a good man, Bertie, and he asked me to look after you. God knows'—with a burst of self-reproachful agony—'I've done it very badly!'

The boy drew his other hand from under the dog's grey head, which was resting upon it, and laid it upon Meredith's hand, that still held his other one.

'Oh, no!' he said softly, 'you haven't; you've been very kind to me, Mr. Meredith. It wasn't *your* fault I got shot. It wasn't anybody's fault, was it? I don't just altogether remember; but I *think* I got in the way. There was a grouse—— But I don't want to think of it!'

He shut his eyes, with a little shiver. When he opened them again, it was to look at Warlock, who, deprived of his master's hand, had crept nearer and was licking the freckled face.

'Poor Warlock,' he said, 'good dog; he's very fond of me. Mr. Meredith——'

His voice broke off, as though speaking were becoming too much of a trouble.

‘Yes, Bertie?’

‘What was I going to say? Oh, I know. If—if I don’t get better soon, will you take care of Warlock?’

‘I will. But, oh, my boy, you *must* get better. I——’
The man’s voice failed, and he bowed his head, with a groan, upon his breast.

The nurse came forward. She had seen a look of exhaustion and pained bewilderment in the boy’s small face.

‘You’d better go now, sir,’ she said. ‘Ah, here’s the doctor!’ she continued, with a sigh of relief.

Meredith moved aside, but he did not go. He went and stood beside Evelyn’s chair, watching the tall lean form and hatchet face of Dr. Woodward, as he bent over the patient.

The child’s eyes had closed; he seemed, to the more inexperienced of the watchers, to be falling asleep. The doctor took one little hand in his and laid his finger upon the pulse.

‘He’s going,’ he said softly. ‘Nurse, you can send for Mrs. Clavering, if you think fit: she can do no harm now; he won’t recover consciousness.’

The woman stole away; and, for five minutes, there was absolute silence in the room. Only the rooks cawed outside among the elms, and the sound of the rushing river came, like a hush, through the morning air.

At last Dr. Woodward laid down the hand he was holding, lifted up his tall gaunt form, and turned to the other two.

‘He’s gone!’ he said; and then he added solemnly, ‘God rest his soul!’

Dr. Woodward was a Protestant, and did not believe in prayers for the dead. But there are moments in life when even Protestants forget their protesting, and fall back unconsciously upon the old formula of a faith that goes deeper to the roots of our humanity. And this was one of them.

THE COLLAPSE OF A STRONG SWIMMER
 Forced by the tide to combat.—SHAKESPEARE : 3 *Henry VI.*
 To be washed off the next tide.—SHAKESPEARE : *Henry V.*

LONGFELLOW : *The Spanish Student.*

Gilbert Clavering was standing by the window, with his back to the door, looking out at the waving branches of the trees that the morning wind was swaying across a sky less clear than it had been at sunrise. There was menace in it, such menace as not infrequently follows on too radiant early promise. As the doctor spoke he turned, showing a white, set face, which hardly altered as the two words, so curtly announcing the end of hope, fell upon his ears. Only the lids of the tired eyes flickered a little, and the lips were set a trifle tighter.

'Ay,' said Clavering, presently—and his voice was as quiet as his face, an absence of accent in its tones which spoke of utter hopelessness—'I knew how it would be.'

‘Did you? Well, there never *was* any hope, you know. But it’s a facer, all the same; specially rough on you, eh?’

‘Yes.’ He paused a little after the word, then, as though momentarily-deadened feeling were beginning to tingle within him, he added, more vehemently: ‘But there, it’s just my luck—or want of luck, rather. It is only what was to be expected.’

‘Eh, what?’ asked the doctor, and he lifted his shaggy eyebrows, and looked yet more keenly at the man before him out of his shrewd grey eyes. ‘Now don’t take it *that* way, Clavering. It’s a bad business enough, God knows; but we’ve got to make the best of it. Squarely looked at, you’re no more in it than the rest of us; so don’t go yielding to morbidity and despair. It’s a facer, as I said, but you’ll take it like a man, eh?’

Gilbert was not responsive. ‘You mean well, I’m sure, doctor,’ was all he said, and his tone relapsed into its former flatness. ‘But it’s easy talking when the responsibility isn’t yours. You don’t know how it weighs. Good morning. I must go now. No! No breakfast, thank you. I’ve trespassed far enough.’

‘But, my dear fellow —— Here, Clavering, don’t go like that. Come back, I say!’

Dr. Woodward followed his guest out of the study, and as far as the threshold of his door, where he stopped to call after the retreating figure. It did not turn, however, for all his calling, and was speedily out of sight.

‘I don’t like the looks of that fellow,’ muttered the doctor, as he prepared to turn in again to make up what arrears he could of his interrupted sleep. ‘It isn’t a healthy state of mind—specially in a Clavering. It’s a queer family, that! Well, well, I’ve done my best. ’Tisn’t my province to minister to a mind diseased. An unfortunate

COLLAPSE OF A STRONG SWIMMER 171

business—a deuced unfortunate ! And I fear we haven't seen the end of it yet.'

Gilbert, meantime, walked at a rapid pace out of the still three-parts sleeping village, and up the road leading from the valley to the hills. He walked without once stopping to look behind him, as though, like Lot, he were driven onward and upward, away from the haunts of men, by a compelling power that allowed of no delay. And, indeed, it was even so. For in Gilbert Clavering's soul had taken lodgment that most terrible of evil spirits, Giant Despair. Driven by this tormenting spirit, the man made haste to get away from his fellows—to get away, only to get away from curious eyes and commenting tongues. This was, for the moment, his one desire. To his morbid, miserable self-consciousness Dr. Woodward's scrutinising gaze and words of kindly admonition had been as vinegar upon an open wound—well-meant, of course ; but causing such an agony of pain and irritation as was well-nigh unbearable. During the solitary hours of the night Gilbert had tried to school himself to stoicism—had thought the lesson learnt, because, for the time, his sense of misery was half-deadened by exhaustion ; but now the anguish was alive again. Gilbert had said that he had known, all the time, how it would be—he had told himself that he never had any hope ; it was not till hope was killed for good and all by those two short words of the doctor's that he knew what a difference exists between the threat and the execution of it. The child was dead—killed by his hand ; and to the man who had, however innocently, wrought the deed, the bitterness of death seemed a never-dying torment.

Gone ! Yes, the victim was gone : gone beyond the reach of pain and sorrow ; but the slayer still lived to bear the penalty.

The stormy red of the early morning had not prophesied

in vain. Darker and darker grew the gathering clouds as Gilbert mounted the hilly road. The wind, which had risen at sunrise, gained strength ; it tossed the branches of the fir plantation through which he had to pass before reaching the open moorland, sending sighs and groans into the air, and buffeting his face as he set it to the hill. But Gilbert noticed it not at all. The sun had ceased to shine ; the mellow calm of late summer-time had been banished from the face of earth and sky. Before full perfection was reached, there appeared the signs of coming decline. Leaves were torn from the twigs of the silver birches leaning over the syke, that trickled and dropped with the quietness of low water down the rocky gorge, and were whirled across the needle-strewn path. The hills, seen at intervals through the firs, gloomed in livid blues and purples against the flying scud which blotted the light from the sky. Drops of rain, the first scouts of the coming downpour, began to fall slantwise through the branches. The gorge and the plantation which clothed its sides were as though dark with the shadow of death.

But though the solitary man, pressing steadily up the hill in the midst of this commotion of nature, shuddered a little at times, he was hardly conscious of what was going on around him. The storm within, that had wrecked the whole of his little world, absorbed him to the exclusion of anything outward. It was only when he was free of the plantation, and, standing on the top of the hill, met the full fury of the wind which swept unhindered across the moor, that the presence of the storm king was thrust upon his consciousness. He had to stop for a moment to take breath and brace his body for a battle with the elements. It was raining in earnest now. The leading battalions of the coming deluge showed white against the darkness of ling-covered ground and cloudy sky, as, with lance in rest,

COLLAPSE OF A STRONG SWIMMER 173

they rode their pale horses across the landscape. There was a regularity of line, as though each white dart had been drawn with a ruler, which was full of the menace of set purpose. On the high levels of the hills there is, indeed, no escape from stress of storm. The grouse knew it, and fled in frightened packs, with sharp cries across the heather. The shaggy hill-ponies, sturdy black cattle and sheep, with their twisted horns and smirched faces, scattered hither and thither seeking shelter. Pewits cried mournfully, as they rose and fell on sweeping wing, carried whither they would not by the merciless wind. Gilbert felt himself seized like the birds, and made to recognise, against his will, the strength of the adversary that withstood his onward progress.

It was good for him that this was so. Outward pressure relieved for the moment the inward push of maddening pain. It was with a sense of something like freedom that he buttoned up his coat, drew his deer-stalker cap down over his eyes, and set himself, with bent head, and every muscle braced, to fight his way across the open, for the mile which still lay between where he then was and the upland valley in which his house stood.

To a man like Gilbert Clavering, of deep and almost morbid feeling, pent in without the power of that outward expression which is the safety-valve of the more unreserved, action is as saving grace. As he fought for each inch of ground with the stormy wind, his brain cleared a little, and, once more, he was conscious of outward things. The lash of rain and hail in his face came with a salutary sting. The rapidly-filling sponge of the peaty ground was cooling to his feet. The wet greyness wrapped him round in its protecting folds, with a comforting concealment in keeping with the misery which had made him flee away from the sight of his fellow-men. The intolerable pain was lulled

for the time by the strong narcotic of bodily exertion, and Gilbert hardly felt its anguish till the moorland was left behind, and, with the comparative shelter of the valley into which he now descended, the call on his physical powers came to an end.

It was one of those sequestered glens, hidden like a treasure in the folds of the fells, that contained the shooting-lodge, fitted up by the owner of the Brackenside property for his agent's residence. Only a few shepherds and one of the keepers shared this lonely little kingdom with Gilbert Clavering. His house, a plain building of grey stone, with the keeper's cottage and the kennels, stood at the upper end of the narrow valley, down the middle of which, chafing among grey rocks and mossy boulders, ran a tiny mountain stream. A group of gaunt Scots firs backed the buildings; a few rowans, birch, and alders dipped their branches in the stream; otherwise of trees there were none. The shielings of the shepherds niched themselves into the steep sides of the gorge, which narrowed rather than widened as it descended towards a broader valley, running at right angles with it below, where stood the rather pretentious erection known as Brackenside Hall. Of this lower valley you could see nothing till you had passed through the narrow cleft in the limestone rock, by which the syke found outlet. A footpath ran beside the water's edge, but no wheeled vehicle could enter the gorge except at its upper end.

Gilbert loved the spot. He had small liking, with some few notable exceptions, for the society of his fellow-men. When he could not have the companionship he cared for, he greatly preferred his own and the mute attendance of an old and favourite setter, which seldom left his side.

The syke was tearing along in a roar of brown peat-water, flecked with white froth balls and bubbles, as he

descended the valley road. He could hear it plunging over the lynn at the head of the gorge with a bellowing sound, that almost drowned the rumble of thunder beginning to make its deep voice heard in the distant bank of inky cloud upon the far horizon. There was but little wind to be felt within the sheltering arms of this snugly lying furrow in the brow of the storm-swept hills. Gilbert felt the peace of a haven after a hurricane at sea by the time he reached his garden-gate. But the peace without was dearly bought by renewal of the storm within. Mental misery awoke again with the cessation of physical exertion, and came upon him with the strength of an armed man who has had a time of rest and refreshment. He set his teeth and drove the nails of his clenched fingers into the palms of his hands as he opened the door and went into the solitary house. His old housekeeper was deaf, and did not hear him ; but Bran, the setter, who had been alone since the day before, though he was a little hard of hearing as well, was too full of the subtle instincts of canine affection to miss the knowledge of his master's approach.

As Gilbert turned the handle of his sitting-room door the creature leaped up from the sheepskin rug before the fire, and, with much tail-wagging and low grumbles of welcome, came to his side. But, for once in his life, poor faithful Bran got no word from his master's mouth nor touch from his master's hand ; Gilbert did not even appear to see him. He turned the key in the door, went to the fireplace, and, dripping wet though he was, leaned his arms upon the mantel-piece and dropped his head upon them with a groan. The water from the collar of his great-coat trickled down his neck. He bore the discomfort for some time as though unaware of it ; then, suddenly, he lifted himself impatiently, wrenched the buttons from their holes, and threw the offending coat to the other end of the room.

His boots followed it, and then, strange creatures of custom that we are, Gilbert Clavering held his misery in leash while he went through the usual preliminaries to settling down by his own fireside after a day of out-door occupation. He washed his hands, put on his slippers, changed his coat for an old velvet smoking-jacket that hung behind the door. Then he stirred the fire, which was always kept burning, summer and winter, threw on a couple of peats from a basket, and, with a long sigh, sank into the depths of his old red-leather chair.

But the sigh, which usually meant relief and anticipation of well-earned rest and comfort, had in it none of these things to-day. For a time Gilbert lay back in the easy-chair with closed eyes. Bran crept to him upon his stomach, in the humble fashion of dogs who are uncertain of their reception; and, with deprecating tail-flaps upon the floor, laid a cold nose upon his master's knee. But he pleaded for recognition in vain; and, at last, falling in with his master's mood, he withdrew to the other side of the hearth-rug and stretched himself, with a plaintive whine of resignation, upon the floor. Still Gilbert did not move; he lay as though stunned in his old arm-chair. There came a tap at the door—his housekeeper, Mrs. Kirsop, had discovered his arrival at last, and had come to see if he wanted anything. Finding the door locked she rattled the handle and called on her master's name. She was answered with a savagery to which she was but little accustomed from quiet Mr. Clavering. It was like the growl of a wounded wild beast that has been tracked to its lair, rather than the answer of 'a Christian body,' as Mrs. Kirsop expressed it. That lady withdrew in a huff to her kitchen.

But Gilbert's condition of coma had been rudely broken; the dull ache into which his pain had sunk for the last half hour, was roused again into intolerable

agony. He sprang from the chair as he heard the bang of the kitchen door, and began to pace his room with the restlessness of a misery that will allow of no repose.

Outside the thunder rolled among the surrounding hills ; the lightning flashed pale fire across the darkened sky. In one of the flashes Gilbert's eye was caught by the responsive gleam of a silver photograph-frame which stood upon his writing-table just under the window. He stopped his pacing for a moment to take it in his hand, and to look earnestly at the likeness it contained. It was a little faded, dating evidently from some years back ; but though the face was less mature, it corresponded, feature by feature, with that of Evelyn Hesketh as he had seen her first. Her frank eyes and full red lips smiled at him from out the silver mounting, just as they had smiled at him in perfect unconsciousness a hundred times since the day when, without a shade of coquetry, she had handed him the coveted presentment from off her stall at one of the Rectory 'sales of work.' Many a time since then had those smiling eyes looked out of their frame at Gilbert Clavering as he came and went. The little picture had seemed to bring her presence into his solitary room, and, whenever he stopped to gaze, it had been to him as a prophecy of the time when, not the presentment only, but the bodily presence, also, of the loved one would enter in and dwell with him for evermore. Gilbert's life had, for many years, been very solitary ; his father and mother had died when he was a little child, and, though a part of his boyhood had been spent with his uncle and aunt and cousin Frank, at Hatherlea Hall, he had never ceased to feel that he was an outsider.

To make a home for himself by persuading Evelyn Hesketh to share it with him had been for five years back his daily strengthening desire ; it had, indeed, been to a

great degree the making of the man. Gilbert Clavering in his youth had shown himself as wild and undisciplined as any of what Dr. Woodward not inaptly called 'the queer family' to which he belonged. He had inherited all those unbridled tendencies which are, too often, found in a race whose forbears have ridden roughshod over their vassals in feudal times ; and he had drunk, and sworn, and gambled, and 'carried on' with the best (or the worst) of his ancestors who lived in those centuries when manliness was held to lie, not in self-restraint, but in license and self-indulgence.

But, since he had known Evelyn Hesketh, Gilbert had learnt to know himself. Love had shown him what manner of man he should be to be worthy to mate with the noble purity, the unsuspecting, though by no means blind, simplicity of a nature such as hers. She had been to him as the bright and unsullied crest of some yet unreachd snow-mountain ; from the mists of the valley she had drawn him upward to the bracing clearness of the heights.

But a woman, even the best of her kind, though she may do much for a man, has but a limited power. Withdraw the element of hope from the influence exerted by her, and the human magnet will generally lose her uplifting quality. There must be something stronger behind her to keep a man straight. And this 'something' was as yet in a very elementary stage with Gilbert Clavering. The natural support failing, his hold upon the supernatural was not strong enough to stand the undivided strain. As he stood, with the photograph in his hand, the face which for so long had cheered and upheld him in many a lonely struggle seemed to change beneath his gaze—her smile was no longer for him. He had seen her look just so upon another man ; nay, he had seen that in her face for another which had never been there for him. His heart told him plainly that the solace of Evelyn's love would never

COLLAPSE OF A STRONG SWIMMER 179

be his : this hope, also, must go out with the rest. What was there left to live for ? He threw the photograph, face downwards, upon the table and covered his eyes with his hand. Thick darkness closed in upon him ; the ground seemed to give way beneath his feet ; the man's brain reeled ; his heart sickened. He stretched out his hands like one stunned and blinded by a rain of buffets which he is powerless to resist, and groped his way back to his chair. Then, from out of that nature which he inherited from his evil ancestors arose the promptings of tendencies, long kept down, but still untamed. Evil beasts seemed to wake and tear him ; the darkness before his closed eyes became alive with devilish faces and beckoning hands ; tempting voices called to him that all was over. He had toiled and struggled up the hill-side in vain. Better give up the attempt and sink back into the valley. Of what good was it to struggle any more ? The world, and Evelyn, nay, God Himself, seemed ranged against him : 'Cast thyself down—fall down and worship me, and rest shall be thine !' If a real voice had spoken in the room, Gilbert Clavering could not have heard it more plainly. He took his hands from his face, sat up, and looked round as though expecting to see a visible presence near him. But there was only the dog stretched upon the hearthrug, motionless, but with one brown eye open and fixed upon his master.

The thunder still growled in the distance. The shadows of the storm filled the familiar room, giving it an unfamiliar aspect. The clock ticked on, showing that time was passing the same as ever, though a life was suffering shipwreck. Over the chimney-piece hung Gilbert's guns. The rack for pipes was on one side of the fireplace beside his hand ; and above it, on one of the supporting nails there hung a key.

He looked at the guns first—looked and looked again with a sort of fascination. Then his eyes fell to his pipes. He took one mechanically from the rack and filled it ; then threw it down impatiently. No amount of smoking could soothe what was wrong to-day.

His glance fell upon the key. He lifted it from the nail, and sat with it for a while, balanced in his hand, his eyes fixed upon a certain brass-clamped corner cupboard opposite his chair. It was as though there were something behind those closed doors that was drawing him thither with resistless force. Yet he hesitated. His glance was turned away for a moment, only to return. He rose from his seat and unlocked the cupboard-door with the key he held. Inside was a silver-bound spirit-case ; Gilbert took it out and put it upon his table. Then, with deliberation, he locked the cupboard again, tried the door of his room, and sat down once more in his chair.

The dog raised its head and looked at him.

Gilbert uttered an impatient exclamation, opened the door and ordered him out. Those faithful eyes seemed to reproach and shame him.

When he was alone he drew the spirit-stand to him, took glass and bottle and poured himself out a draught, which he drank undiluted, another, and yet another. He drank eagerly, greedily, like a thirsty man long kept from water. And, as he drank, the pain and misery seemed to loosen their hold upon him. He sighed deeply, and sank back into his chair. He felt like a drowning man who, after vain struggles, gives up at last, and is carried along by the tide in semi-unconsciousness. The evil spirit to whom he had yielded had him in his power and was keeping the condition of surrender by granting temporary rest. It is often so at first ; the mockery comes later. Rest ! rest ! Gilbert roused himself for a moment, poured out yet another

COLLAPSE OF A STRONG SWIMMER 181

glass with a shaking hand, and eyes which saw all in vanishing mist. Then he fell back again, and the world and its miseries fell away from him and passed into oblivion.

‘When the evil spirit is gone out of a man he walketh through dry places seeking rest, and, finding none, he saith, “I will return unto my house whence I came out.” And when he cometh he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.’
Profound, most sad of truths! God help the man whose heart is empty.

CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE DEEP

This one man—

So anxious not to go to Heaven alone.

JEAN INGELow : *Brothers and a Sermon.*

HYP.

Yet thou shalt not perish ;

The strength of thine own arm is thy salvation.

LONGFELLOW : *The Spanish Student.*

JOHN ALLISON stopped at the garden-gate of the agent's house on the Brackenside estate.

It was the evening of the day following that on which little Bertie Clavering had taken his leave of a world where his tarrying had been so short. The thunderstorm was over and gone, but it had left behind it tokens of its recent presence in the shape of a grey and troubled sky, burns and sykes still full of brawling water, grass laid flat, and flowers beaten into the soil. Under the low grey walls of Gilbert Clavering's house the ground was strewn with the delicate pink petals of the monthly roses, which, in summer time, wreathed the windows. The ranks of bachelor's-buttons and African marigolds, between which ran the path to the door, looked as though they had undergone a cannonade, so many of their stiff and sturdy heads had fallen beneath the hail. Deaf Mrs. Kirsop was looking ruefully at them from out of the kitchen window as Allison came up ; for, though her master paid no attention to what she called ' the floers,' they were the delight of his housekeeper's eyes, and represented to her that little softening influence which, I suppose, the hardest of us admit somewhere into the most jealously-guarded heart.

‘Is Mr. Clavering at home?’ John Allison asked the question through the half-open kitchen window, as he lifted his stick in salutation to Mrs. Kirsop.

She frowned, and put a hollowed hand ostentatiously to her ear.

He repeated the question in a louder voice, opening the gate and walking up to the window as he did so.

‘Mebbes he is, and mebbes he isn’t,’ was the enigmatical answer. ‘Ah joost ken nowt aboot him sin’ he cam heame yesterday; an’ that’s treuth. He’s like a bear wi’ a sair heid, if ye ax me to speak plain; sae Ah joost lat him alane. Gin ye’ll tak’ ma advice ye’ll dae t’seame.’

On John Allison’s grave face there came the merest reflection of a smile.

‘I think I’ll see for myself,’ he said in his deep voice. ‘It’s the most satisfactory way.’

The tall thin figure in the black clerical cloak passed through the open door of the house, and knocked at that of the sitting-room, which held a corresponding position to the kitchen on the other side of the narrow passage. No answer. He knocked again. Still nothing was heard. Was Mr. Clavering in or not?

John Allison was anxious to see him. He had come all the way from Lavingham for the purpose, in consequence of a few words exchanged with Dr. Woodward the evening before. And, having come so far, he was not to be so easily deterred. He went out into the garden again, and glanced quickly in at the sitting-room window.

A figure, with its back towards him, was crouching over the fire. John Allison’s quick eye noted the deep dejection of the position. It noted, also, the spirit-stand and glass upon the table; and the desire for an interview quickened.

Here was a soul in peril—a soul which might yet be

saved. And, with John Allison, the saving of souls was as much a passion as the killing of game or the breaking of hearts is with other men. His resolution to storm the stronghold and rescue the perishing tightened into a fixed purpose not easily to be baffled. The priest in him came prominently to the front. But John Allison was not only a priest. He was, also, a man and a gentleman. He would not proceed to a frontal attack, as some might have done in his place, by tapping at the window, but returned to the door, and rapped on the panels louder than before. He knew instinctively that Gilbert Clavering would, under existing circumstances, consider any other summons as an intrusion.

The rap was followed by a movement inside the room. The priest's alert ear heard the pushing back of a chair, the clink of glass against metal, and the turning of a key. Then the door was opened, and Clavering, haggard of face and disordered in dress, stood on the threshold confronting him.

His countenance did not lighten when he saw who was there.

'Mr. Allison !' he said, in a sharp voice, which the priest at once detected as scarcely under control ; 'you here ? Do you want anything ?'

'Only to pay a friendly call, my dear fellow,' was the gentle answer. 'May I come in ?' he went on, as Gilbert still stood holding the door in his hand.

'Certainly, if you wish it.' Neither tone nor manner was encouraging. But Allison took no notice ; as Gilbert stepped back, he passed into the room and sat down in a chair which his host indicated by the sullen fire.

Gilbert shut the door again, took the poker, and used it vehemently, as though glad to have something which he might legitimately attack. The grate and hearth were

choked with ashes, the dust of them flew out and settled on the priest's black cloak ; but he made no sign.

When Gilbert had expended his energies on the fire, he threw on a log from a basket by his side, and subsided, with a long breath, into his arm-chair. For some moments the two men sat silent, on opposite sides of the hearth. The French clock on the chimney-piece ticked off the minutes between them ; the wind drove a loose rose-bough against the window, as it sighed round the house ; the fresh log on the fire began to hiss and crackle as the flame took hold upon it.

Gilbert Clavering seemed to have forgotten that he was no longer alone. His tired eye-lids were half closed ; the hand which lay upon his knee opened and shut mechanically. John Allison, watching him furtively with the eye of a soul-reader, detected in it a tell-tale tremor. But he said nothing.

Presently Gilbert sat up with a sudden movement. 'Well ?' he said impatiently.

John Allison smiled cynically. 'Well ?' he repeated.

'I mean, what is it ? What do you want ?' There was acute irritation in the tone. But again the priest took no notice.

'Oh, nothing,' he said carelessly ; 'a friendly call, as I said before. It isn't the first, is it, Clavering ?'

It was not. Twice before had the Vicar of Lavingham dropped in to visit this occasional member of his congregation, and neither of those previous visits had been resented. But circumstances were different now ; and what had before been taken as an act of friendliness, was now an unwelcome intrusion—the approach of a surgeon to a wounded man who has not asked his services.

Gilbert moved impatiently in his chair.

'Your benevolent intention is thrown away, on this occasion, I fear,' he answered acidly. And then, looking up and catching the priest's strange eyes fixed kindly, though searchingly, upon his face, he winced, as the wounded man might have done at the surgeon's touch, adding : 'I'm outside such friendly offices.'

'I think not,' said Allison, ignoring the repulse.

'When I want your help I will ask for it,' retorted Gilbert rudely. 'Meantime——'

'Meantime, you will not send me away when I have come so far ? You would not be so inhospitable, Clavering ?'

Gilbert said nothing. He frowned and altered the position of his chair, so that his face might not be so directly in the line of those searching eyes. The desolate look in his face deepened. He gave a long involuntary sigh.

John Allison leaned forward.

'Is there nothing that I can do ?'—the deep, penetrating voice betrayed the tenderest concern. 'You cannot, surely, refuse the sympathy of a friend ? It goes hard with a man when he is left quite alone under such a visitation.'

'A visitation !' the word seemed to bring with it a thought that stirred the hearer out of the cynical calm behind which he had taken refuge.

'The visitation of God, as they say at inquests—eh, Allison ? What, you would bring God into this devil's business—would you ? D—— it all, man ! Take care what you are doing. This would make a saint blaspheme !'

He started to his feet and began to pace the room. Every movement bespoke intolerable misery. The man's pretence at calm—that poor outward bulwark of a proud soul wounded to the quick—was effectually beaten down.

John Allison sat quietly in his chair observing Gilbert, without appearing to observe him. He knew his man, and was not dissatisfied with the progress of the interview.

Presently, Clavering ceased his walk and sank again into his chair.

'It is no good, Allison !' he said, with despair in his voice. 'You mean kindly, I know ; but there is nothing to be done. It is a business which is beyond the mending of any man.'

'Of any *man*, perhaps,' was the quiet answer ; 'but not of God. He——'

But Gilbert interrupted the words with a curse that, for a moment, made the priest recoil in horror ; but only for a moment. He knew enough of men to recognise the cry of a soul in the depths of trouble and despair. He was no narrow bigot, to be turned aside even by blasphemy such as this ; for, underneath it, he saw a soul in torture which knows not what it does. And he knew that God, also, knew, and could, therefore, pardon. For a space he sat quite still, saying nothing ; waiting for what he felt sure would follow.

And Gilbert sat still, too, as though the outburst had in some way relieved him. Then, quite suddenly, a great sob shook him. He got up and walked to the window, fighting with an emotion he was too proud to show. After a time he mastered it and came back to his place. His face was pale and drawn, even beyond what it had been before.

'You see, I'm past praying for,' he said with a pitiful attempt at pleasantry. 'A reprobate, my dear Allison, of the most hardened type. You'd better let me go to the devil in my own way.'

'Not if I can stop you,' was the quiet answer ; and Allison turned those eyes, which Gilbert had compared to search-lights, full upon the other's face.

For a moment Clavering bore the gaze. He seemed to be hardening and stiffening himself against it. It was a critical moment. If John Allison had wavered for an

instant the position would have become too strong to be broken through. But the priest's penetrating eye and unerring instinct saw the quivering soul behind its poor defences. He knew that, if he would save it from the abyss, no quarter must be given. He kept his eyes steady, and waited patiently while his heart prayed.

Presently, Gilbert moved uneasily.

'You can't stop me,' he said uncertainly; 'I've begun the descent already. You don't know what it is to try to save a drowning man who has no wish for rescue.'

'I know.'

The wild, bloodshot eyes flashed a quick look at the steady orbs before them, then sank before their gaze.

'Good God, man!' he cried; 'don't tell me you know me better than myself. I tell you I've thrown up the sponge; it's only a matter of time. Go away and let me be. You'd despise me if you knew the truth.'

'I think I do know; but you see I don't despise you.'

Gilbert looked at him again inquiringly, and again his eyes fell under the steady gaze of the priest. He took a paper-knife from the table and began balancing it on his finger; but his hand shook, and the ivory would not be steadied. He tossed it impatiently from him.

'Then I'll tell you,' he said, 'I'll put the case with brutal plainness, since nothing else'll do. You know what we Claverings are? You must have heard plenty about us in the country-side. I was not a whit better than the rest of us when I was a lad. Of late I've pulled up—for a reason. Well, the reason's gone. This cursed business has pushed me to extremities. I've gone back, like the sow to her wallowing in the mire—taken to drink, if you want to know the sort of mire.' (Allison saw the red of shame rise in the haggard cheek.) 'All last night I was as drunk as any of your pitmen. This morning—— Good

God, haven't I told you enough ? You should know that I'm a wreck. Go, and let me sink quietly.'

'You will not sink.'

'What's to hinder me ?'

'Yourself, Clavering ; yourself, and the grace of God. You have not led a clean life all these years, and—forgive me if I say what, perhaps, you yourself have never put into words—submitted yourself to the Divine influence, to be content with wallowing. This is a lapse from which you will rise again.'

Gilbert moved uneasily. 'Never,' he said, 'never ! The struggle is over. I have not the strength to pull myself out of the slough. Besides—if you knew what it was to gain even a few hours' oblivion from the thought of that awful business—That poor boy's face has been enough to drive me mad ! I have seemed to see it everywhere.' He shuddered and covered his eyes with a shaking hand. 'Anything to forget—anything—anything !'

John Allison reached out and took Clavering's other hand into his strong, cool grasp. It was hot and trembling. Gilbert struggled for a moment to withdraw it ; then, as though nothing were worth resisting, he let it lie limp within the clasp of his visitor.

'It's terrible, I know,' said the deep full voice. 'But you are a man, Clavering, and a strong one, notwithstanding your present weakness. Think of your responsibilities. That poor woman will look to you for support in her hour of need. You are now the representative of the family, responsible for all the position requires. The estate is yours, remember——'

But Gilbert started as though he had been stabbed. He wrenched his hand from Allison, and rose to his feet with an oath.

'Never !' he said passionately. 'Never that—I will not take it. Do you think I could profit by—by——' He choked over the words.

'You cannot help yourself.'

'But I *will*. I'll go to the ends of the earth before I'll touch a penny of that cursed inheritance. Nothing can make me take it.'

'Your sense of duty will make you see your responsibilities, presently, Clavering. But let that be at present. What you have to do now is to promise me you will not touch another drop of spirits to-day—till I see you again. Will you do that ?'

Gilbert was silent ; the priest could see the resistance in his face. Then, suddenly, he laughed cynically. 'Well, since there's none left in the house, and I have no inclination to make a public exhibition of myself by going to the Hatherlea Arms, the promise is easily given,' he said. 'But, remember, it's only for to-day.'

'That is all I want,' was the quiet reply. 'Yes, I will go now. Good-bye. Don't forget you have one friend ready to stand by you, Clavering. If there is anything——'

'Yes, yes, I know. You are very good—better than I deserve. I'm not worth the interest you take in me, and that's the truth. After all, I'm better left alone. No ?'—a little flickering smile came into the tired eyes at the priest's disclaimer. 'Well, good-bye.'

'And God bless you,' was the earnest rejoinder.

Then the two men clasped hands and parted.

Gilbert went to the window and watched the tall black figure pass between the ranks of bachelor's-buttons and African marigolds to the garden gate. He watched it still, as it turned the corner of the house to mount the hill to the moors. He half expected that Allison would turn

and give him another look before he disappeared from sight, and he set his face to meet it with stolidity. But the black-cloaked figure did not turn ; his work was done, for that day, and he knew it. Not by so much as a backward glance would he risk the weakening of the effect. Gilbert was conscious of a shade of disappointment, as the last flutter of the priest's cloak vanished behind the house. He would have liked to show Allison that, whatever he might think, priestly influence could, after all, make but little impression on him. The satisfaction was denied him.

‘ Well, after all, he’s a good fellow, and means well,’ he said to himself, as he took down his cap and prepared to go out into the open air. ‘ But he’s come to the wrong shop, this time. Pah, this room reeks of spirits ! ’ He flung up the window, with an impulse of disgust, and let the strong, pure, damp-laden west wind blow in unhindered.

How fresh and untainted it seemed ! The scent of wet peat and bracken was in its breath. Gilbert breathed it in with a sense of keen relief, as he turned his back upon the house, and trod the needle-strewn path under the fir trees, which led down the narrow glen. His aching head began, gradually, to ease ; his fevered pulse slowed down. It was like going out of a sick-room to meet that reviving gale.

‘ To the ends of the earth,’ he repeated as he went down the path to the point from which another track led upward to the moors. ‘ Well ; why not ? It’s the one thing which can save me, if I *am* to be saved.’

Without thinking, he turned from the downward path, and set himself to mount the hill. His limbs trembled ; his breath came short and quick. It was such a paltry hill ; and yet, when he reached the top, Gilbert felt as though he had climbed a mountain.

One night's license had sapped his manhood to this extent. The consciousness of it filled him with shame, though no one—not even his dog—was there to see the change.

‘If I am to be saved? If——’ He stopped, and looked at the wide view, which opened on him from the crest of the moors. Below him lay the valley of the Tyne. The river serpentine through its hanging shaws and green meadows, like a silver snake, under a beam of white light which shot upon it from between the drifting clouds. Beyond it, the hills swept away to the far horizon in a dozen tender gradations of grey, and violet, and blue. He could see Hexham Abbey, seated on its steep, looming from out the falling shadows. Nearer still, set flat, like a barge upon the river, was Hatherlea Bridge, its Church and Hall half smothered in thick green foliage. Gilbert felt a sharp pang shoot through him as he looked at the home of his people.

‘Mine!’ he said to himself. ‘Mine—and through *that*! Well, the line must be drawn there, at any rate. There are some things quite impossible. The ends of the earth, perhaps; but never here. Besides, in any case, it is out of the question. The money is wanting. Let it go! And I——’ Suddenly his face lit, as at a welcome thought. A look, half fierce, half rapturous, came into his eyes.

‘What better? A bullet or a shell; a sword thrust or a sabre cut—there is always a chance in war for the man whose life is a burden to him. It is a way out, at any rate, more honourable than the mire.’

CHAPTER XX

DRIFTING

Wavering, sooner lost.—SHAKESPEARE: *Twelfth Night*.

‘WELL, *that’s* over ; and thankful I am that it is. I cannot bear funerals.’

Miss Teresa Williamson gave a shake to the skirt of her new black gown, as a bird might shake its feathers after a passing shower. She looked at her sister, by whom she was walking, with her neat head a little on one side, and, getting no reply, she remarked in a sharp staccato :

‘I believe you *like* them, Maria ; I do indeed. It’s a shockingly plebeian taste, I can tell you. But there’s no accounting for tastes, I suppose. It’s my opinion you would like to have us all to die daily, just for the sake of the funeral. But we can’t do *that* to oblige you, whatever the Bible may advise.’

The mild blonde head of the elder sister turned slowly ; the calm moon-face showed a momentary clouding.

‘Teresa !’ remonstrated the quiet voice, ‘how *can* you ? Do you know, I’m sometimes frightened at your profanity ? You don’t mean it, I’m sure. But still——’

‘But still, there it is ! Oh, my dear, foolish old sissy, don’t you know that if I’m profane, the blame of it lies at your door ? You would make a saint turn mocker out of sheer cussedness, when you put on that tone and expression. But about the funerals——’

‘Oh, *do* stop, Teresa !’ was the distressed rejoinder ; and tears came into the mild blue eyes, which often looked so

misty and far-away ; 'it makes me shiver to hear you, it does, indeed. "To depart is far better," I know that ; and I'm sure you won't deny that to be taken from the evil to come is the best fate that can happen to anyone. But, *this* funeral ! It's rebellious, I know ; but, if it had pleased God to take me instead of that little fellow I'd have thanked Him on bended knees. It's so hard to understand why the young are taken and the old left. But there, I won't be faithless, and there's comfort in such a beautiful service as we've had to-day, that you must allow. The dear Canon was so helpful, and the choir sang so sweetly ; and as for the flowers—they might have come straight from Paradise, where, doubtless, the dear little boy is singing praises even now.'

'Maria,' said the younger sister emphatically, 'you're a wonderful woman ; but please remember you're talking to a person of common-sense, and don't let rapture run away with reason. If *you* had been in Bertie's grave how *could* you have given thanks on bended knees ? If I hadn't some sense of the fitness of things, I declare you'd make me laugh ; but there, never mind—you can't help it, I suppose. Pull your bonnet straight—to the left—and pick up your skirt a little, it's muddy since the rain. Rose might have given us a carriage, I think. But there, she never thinks—except of herself, poor thing. I wonder what she'll do, now Gilbert comes in for the property ?'

'Poor dear Gilbert !' sighed the elder lady, 'he'll have small pleasure in his inheritance, I'm thinking. He takes this accident sorely to heart, they say. I don't wonder he wasn't at the funeral.'

'Well, he *should* have been, nevertheless,' rejoined Miss Teresa, in the same sharp voice. 'It was a great mistake stopping away. He should have come all the more because of what's happened. People are sure to talk.'

Miss Williamson sighed. 'My heart bleeds for him,' she murmured. 'But still there's something in what you say, Teresa. One didn't quite like to see that Mr. Meredith taking the lead, and acting as though he was chief mourner, when there's still a Clavering at the head of the family.'

'You could see that? Well now, Maria, there's still hope for you!'

The younger sister nodded approvingly at her elder; it looked as though she were clapping her mentally on the back. 'You'll see,' she went on knowingly. 'Mr. Meredith will be all to the fore now. If Gilbert should sell the place, and as likely as not he will, coming by it as he has, and saddled as it is with poor Rose's jointure, I shouldn't wonder a bit if Mr. Meredith buys it.'

'Oh, surely not, Teresa, so long in the family as it's been! And then, isn't there the entail?' She looked doubtfully at her sister as she said this.

'The entail? Nay, poor little Bertie was the last in that; I heard Mr. Tinniswood say so. Gilbert can do what he likes with the place, except, perhaps, keep it up as it should be kept.'

Miss Williamson sighed again.

'There's been a Clavering at Hatherlea for the last six hundred years,' she said regretfully. 'One can't bear to think of the old family coming to an end. But I oughtn't to feel like that. Pride of family is as sinful as any other sort of pride, I fear, Teresa. It may even be a snare to us, though we're not exactly Claverings.'

'Hardly,' was the dry reply; 'if our half-sister hadn't married Rose's husband's father there would have been no connection at all. So where the sin comes in, Maria, it's hard to see. You needn't trouble your conscience on the

subject of family pride, at any rate. I acquit you on that score.'

'All the same, I've a feeling about it, Teresa. I couldn't bear the thought of a stranger from the Colonies, like Mr. Meredith, at the old place.'

'Not if your favourite, Evelyn Hesketh, were to come in with him? How does that strike you, Maria?'

The ladies, by this time, had reached the Hall gates, and were walking slowly up the avenue between the spreading beech trees. The sun, hidden by clouds during the earlier part of the day, had come out suddenly, and was making a dappled pathway to the door of the beautiful old house which, wet-faced from a recent shower, was blinking in its beams. The blinds were still down over its many windows. It had a sad and sorrowful aspect.

'Poor old place!' sighed Miss Williamson; 'I don't like to think of changes of any sort. Still, do you *really* think he will marry Evelyn, Teresa?'

'Yes, I do—if she'll have him, that is. Did you see how he kept watching her at the funeral? It was really quite out of place, I thought, considering the occasion. Not that Evelyn paid him the least attention. She was perfectly correct, and never so much as raised her eyes. But there's *something* between them, I think. Do you remember my telling you I met them standing together in Lovers' Lane, the day before poor little Bertie was killed? Well, it did not strike me at the time; but, when I came to think of it afterwards, and to put this and that together, I shrewdly suspect I interrupted a declaration.'

Miss Williamson's attention was completely gained. She turned to her sister with a light in her eyes which bespoke all the interest that elderly spinsters usually display in the 'honourable estate' which they themselves have missed.

‘You don’t say so, Teresa?’ she asked briskly. ‘Now, why didn’t you mention it before?’

‘Well, a tragic death, like poor Bertie’s, is calculated to put such things as marrying and giving in marriage out of the head of the ordinary woman,’ answered Miss Teresa dryly. ‘*You’re* extraordinary, Maria. One can never calculate upon what mundane affairs you will think worthy of attention. But—hush, for goodness’ sake! Here’s Mr. Meredith.’

The Colonial, in fact, overtook the two ladies at this point, coming alongside of them with his brisk step, and pausing to take off his hat.

‘I stayed to attend to the necessary details with Canon Hesketh,’ he said, with just a shade of importance in his tone. ‘As Mr. Clavering did not turn up, these things devolve upon me.’

Claude’s face was composed to the gravity proper to the occasion; but the expression was studied, not natural, as a reader of faces might have seen, had such been there. The genuine emotion and regret which had spoken to Evelyn Hesketh’s heart, on the morning of the little lad’s death, had disappeared as quickly as the momentary ripples upon water when the passing breeze has gone. Men of Claude’s temperament are never in the same mood for long. Their feelings are easily stirred while the sorrowful scene is before them; when it is withdrawn they are not long in subsiding. The funeral over, Claude Meredith had drawn a deep breath and had thrown off the gloom which was so distasteful to him, in the spirit at least, though etiquette still bade him cherish it in the letter. Like the old house, his blinds would be drawn up as soon as ever it was permissible to re-admit the cheerful daylight. He frowned now at its shrouded front with evident discontent.

‘I thought it was customary to open the windows when

the funeral was over,' he said, with a sound of annoyance in his voice. 'It's so horrid to sit in a dark room. You must excuse me if I'm speaking heresy ; I'm only a Colonial, you know, Miss Williamson.' He added the words sarcastically ; but his sarcasm was lost on Maria.

'Poor Rose is terribly crushed you must remember, Mr. Meredith,' was her rather evasive answer. 'She was much too prostrate to attend the funeral ; in fact, I doubt whether she knows that it has taken place. I told the housekeeper to let things be for to-day—it seemed for the best.'

'Of course ! of course ! I should not think of objecting. But Mrs. Clavering, poor lady, will soon have to know how matters stand. I understand that everything comes to the cousin ?'

'Yes. But she has her jointure, and I am sure Gilbert will be in no hurry to disturb her,' put in Miss Teresa sharply. 'In fact, as I was just saying to my sister, under the circumstances, I much doubt whether he'll ever live here.'

'Indeed ?' Claude Meredith asked the question with interest in his tone. Then, without waiting for an answer, he went on meditatively : 'But I thought as much, and others have said the same. In his place I should cut the whole concern, sell the property root and stock, and start afresh elsewhere. That unlucky accident will stick to him like a burr if he remains on here. Good God, if I were Clavering, that boy's face would come between me and everything !'

The studied gravity in Claude's face was suddenly broken up by a more natural expression, as the scene of poor Bertie's death came vividly before him. A look of genuine horror came into his blue eyes.

'A man cannot always give in to his feelings, Mr.

Meredith,' said gentle Miss Williamson, more stiffly than usual. 'Mr. Clavering is the head of a very old family. He has his responsibilities to consider.'

'Yes, *noblesse oblige*,' put in Miss Teresa, as feelingly as though, spite of her recent disclaimer, she had been a real Clavering herself.

Claude Meredith looked at the spinsters from under a pair of raised eyebrows. He shrugged his shoulders. Perfectly aware of the snub which these ladies had just given him, he met it with outward contempt, though inwardly he was as nettled as even Miss Teresa could have wished.

'Ah, well, we shall see,' he said carelessly. 'You will not bet, I suppose, or I would venture a pair of gloves with confidence on my opinion.'

'Certainly *not*, Mr. Meredith,' was the severe reply of the elder sister; while the younger said more scathingly: 'Betting after a funeral! That's just a little unusual, isn't it? But, surely, you've forgotten.' Meredith reddened and bit his lip.

'So I have, ladies; you are quite right to remind me,' he said aloud, adding inwardly: 'The old cats! Aristocratic, pious, and decorous claws are the devil to scratch. I must take care what I say, it seems. Ah, here's Evelyn! The ground's no less slippery in that direction. But, luckily, she'll expect nothing till after to-day. The blinds are still down; I shall have time to think.'

The girl came to the door as they reached the steps. She was looking pale and subdued. The black dress, which she wore on account of the funeral, lent a shade of severity to her girlish freshness, that was, at the same time, repressive and attractive. There was the dimness of tears in her frank eyes, and her usually bright manner had a softness and collected quietness about it which was new to Meredith. She stood in the brown shadow of the old door-

way, waiting for the coming of himself and his companions, like the impersonation of that Charity which can weep with those who weep, as well as rejoice with those in happiness. Meredith's heart went out to her with a fresh impulse of desire. What a wife she would make for a man, whatever his mood might be ! But the blinds were still down, luckily for him ; and, in spite of that stirring of the heart, his reason told him that, for the moment, it was better so.

'Miss Maria, dear,' she said quietly, as the party came up. 'I saw you coming, out of the window, and I ran down to say that Rose would like to see you in her room for a few minutes before tea. You'll find her very much exhausted, poor dear. But she seems to think a word from you would comfort her. Oh, Warlock ! *Do* go down ! Poor little fellow, can't you understand ?'

The studied quiet of the girl's round voice broke quickly into a tone of sharp distress, as Bertie's little terrier, escaping from the care of the cook, who had undertaken to keep him out of the way till the funeral was over, rushed frantically through the hall to throw himself upon Evelyn. There was inquiry only short of speech in the dog's brown eyes, as she stooped to caress him.

'Where is my master ? Oh, won't you tell me ?' they seemed to say. Then, getting no answer, the small grey bundle of hair turned its attention to Meredith with the same dumb question in the faithful eyes. Meredith's easily stirred heart was touched at once. He looked with quick understanding at Evelyn, as, in his turn, he patted the dog's soft head.

'Oh, *do* send him away, Evie, dear,' said Miss Teresa nervously, as the little fellow showed signs of turning his attention to herself. 'He'll ruin our new gowns with those rough paws. There's nothing so disagreeable as to be

clawed by dogs and cats. There, go down, Warlock !' she went on, retreating hurriedly within the doorway. 'For goodness' sake catch him, Mr. Meredith, before he makes his way upstairs. He was howling horribly outside the nursery door this morning, and Rose gets quite hysterical when she hears him.'

'Poor little fellow ! You're not a Christian, and, therefore, have no right to mourn for your friends—you must learn to understand that,' said Claude, with another look at Evelyn, as he caught the dog and lifted him into his arms out of the way of Miss Teresa's retreating figure.

The girl threw him a glance at the same time grateful and understanding. But she said nothing till the two ladies had disappeared up the staircase. Then she said, in a moved tone, which showed a certain confidence that her hearer was in sympathy with her mood :

'I'm always so sorry for the dogs. They feel their loss so dreadfully ; and there's no consolation for them.'

'No, they're like children. Death is absolute darkness to them—for the time. This poor little fellow thinks his heart is broken. But he'll get over it, as the children do. Won't you, Warlock, my man ?'

The dog whined gently, nestled to the man's bosom, and licked his hand.

'I'm not so sure. Little Bertie was the centre of his world. Even when he was at school, Warlock never quite ceased to look for him. A master is like a god to a dog. He cannot do without something to worship.'

'But even we humans do not always confine our worship to one deity, do we, Miss Hesketh ? When one fails us we get another. And Warlock has a new master now. Poor little Bertie left him as a legacy to me. He'll transfer his worship to me, and so console himself, after a time, see if he doesn't.'

Meredith raised his eyes suddenly from the dog, as he said this, and instantly saw that he had said the wrong thing. Evelyn was no longer in sympathy with his thought. She had been repelled.

'You don't believe in fidelity then, Mr. Meredith?' she answered coldly. '*I do.* But, then, I'm a woman, which, perhaps, accounts for it. Ah! there's Rose's bell! I must go.'

She left him, and walked up the stairs with a stiffness about her young figure and a severity about her young face which would have made the man smile, if he himself had not been personally concerned. But there is a vast difference between the views of a mere spectator and those of an interested person. And Meredith felt none of the humour of the situation.

'There! I've put my foot in it,' he said to himself, as, followed by Warlock, he ran down the steps again, and made his way through a door in the wall to the garden, with the intention of consoling himself with a cigar. 'She has her doubts of me, I can see that; and, like a fool, I must needs go and say what must lend colour to them. These women are the very deuce; one had need to be as careful what one does with them, as though one were meddling with electric wires. But, after all, what *is* one to do? I can't stay on here indefinitely. I must go away, at least for a time, and I'm bound to say something before I go. Confound it all! What *am* I to say? That girl cares for me—I know that much already. And she knows that I care for her. She's the very wife I want. If I let her go, I lose my own chance of happiness, and I show myself a brute to her. Yet, where's the possibility of marriage? If only poor Clavering had left me those diamonds! They've done no good at all to his poor little son. If he'd known what was to happen, how different my position might have been!'

Meredith fetched a deep sigh, as, having gained the

privacy of the garden, he took out his cigar-case and vestas and prepared to light up. He felt unusually upset and in need of soothing and comfort ; yet he doubted whether even a cigar would bring them. The world was very much out of joint for him, so much so that even tobacco, that resource of the distracted man, seemed inadequate to set it right.

No wonder Meredith sighed ; yet the scene amidst which he found himself was the very essence of quietness and repose.

The walled garden of Hatherlea Hall was, as it were, niched into the building itself. The old house turned its back upon the square enclosure, shutting it in on the whole of one side, and on part of two others. What remained was fenced from the outer world by high brick walls, over the top of which nothing could be seen but the upper branches of trees and the remoteness of hills and sky.

Always secluded, it was more than ever so to-day, when none of the gardeners were working there, and those windows which overlooked it were like closed and sleeping eyes.

The clouds had cleared away, and the sun shone down with large, good-humoured smile upon the sheltered square, upon the fruit-trees nailed against the walls, where peaches and apricots, pears and apples and plums offered themselves freely to his kiss ; upon the rows of sunflowers, worshipping on either side of the walks ; upon hollyhocks, standing sentinel over the dahlias whose heads seemed overweighted with sleep. Black bands of shade lay under the hedges of close-clipped yew, which, like screens, shaded the more exposed part of the garden from prevailing winds, and the house threw its peaked-roofed, many-chimneyed shadow across some of the beds. Otherwise all was sunshine. Bees hummed drowsily from flower to flower ; butterflies

carelessly flitted out the moments of a short and happy life. There seemed no room within the four walls of the old garden for anything alien to warmth and peace.

Only the man, like Adam in Eden, was filled with the restlessness of discontent.

He lit his cigar, threw away the match, and set himself to pace up and down between the sunflowers, puffing blue smoke into the clear air. But tobacco brought peace no more than did the slumbrous environment. His uneasy mind moved with his uneasy feet and forbade quietude.

‘After all,’ he said to himself, as he threw away the half-smoked cigar that had failed to bring him comfort, and lighted another in its place, ‘poor old Calvert would rather I had the money than Cousin Gilbert. I’m sure of that. Didn’t he say as much? He couldn’t stand Cousin Gilbert, I could see that. What was it he said?’ Claude frowned, as, with an effort of memory, he brought up before his mind that scene on the veldt—the sun-parched plain—the dead—the dying. “‘I’d a deal rather you had them, than my Cousin Gilbert.” Yes, that was it; it was his last wish. Should I be altogether wrong in obeying it? Let’s see.’ He took a pocket-book from the breast of his coat, extracted a bit of folded paper and read it carefully from beginning to end. ‘No word of Cousin Gilbert there! I doubt if the law would give it to him. The bequest is left entirely to my discretion. If he had not told me, I question whether anyone could have guessed from this that I was not his heir. What would a lawyer say, I wonder? But it would be risky to lay the matter before anyone, if—— But what am I thinking of? I’m not a swindler, when all’s said and done—not that a man need be exactly that, supposing he were to take the other view of the case. But, curse it all, how easily the thing might be done—and what a difference it would make to me!’

Meredith carefully replaced the paper in his pocket-book, and turned, once more, in his pacing of the walk. The sunlight had shifted a little. The shadow of the fine old house was lengthening across the garden. The beautiful pearl-greys and delicate lilacs of the old stone walls were taking a deeper hue.

‘If that fellow sells it, as they say he is likely to do, it is just the place I should like to buy—supposing I had the money. And if I had the house, what a mistress Evelyn Hesketh would make for it! An anchorage, indeed, for a fellow who has been drifting all his life about the world. Good God, it’s a temptation! Only to keep silent—that’s all. I might even borrow the money for the present, and replace it in the future. A sum like that would be like a nest-egg, it would bring in more. If the fellow’s so hard-hit, as they say Clavering is, he won’t care about money at present; he’ll think of nothing but getting away. Ah, there’s the tea-bell—and—— By Jove, they’re drawing up the blinds! Well, mine must go up, to-morrow; though, devil take me, if I know what’s behind! But sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.’

With which reflection, like the devil quoting Scripture, Claude Meredith threw dust in his own eyes, and let himself drift at the mercy of the tide.

CHAPTER XXI

PLUCKING THE ROSE

But when you have our roses, you barely leave our thorns to prick ourselves, and mock us with our bareness.

SHAKESPEARE: *All's Well*, &c.

LADY MARGARET HESKETH sat at her davenport, writing notes. She wrote a large hand, requiring a great expenditure of ink ; one of those hands which causes its writer to jump at her correspondent's eyes and force her personality upon his notice.

'No mistaking Lady Margaret's writing,' was the common remark when her notes came out of the post-bag. You could hear her pen clawing the paper from the other end of the room.

Her stepdaughter was there, just then, arranging flowers. She was, in fact, making a little white cross for the small grave which had been added to those of the churchyard two days before.

The scratching of her stepmother's pen annoyed her to an unusual degree. As a rule, though she and Lady Margaret were never quite in harmony, Evelyn's natural geniality made a padding of cotton-wool between herself and any jarring element. She could ignore it so long as her heart was at leisure with itself. But to-day that *scratch, scratch*, was unaccountably irritating ; it seemed, like the nibbling of a mouse, to take hold upon and worry at her nerves. The delicate stalk of a white carnation snapped in

her fingers, and she threw down the head as though it had offended her, with a muttered exclamation.

Lady Margaret pushed back her chair a little and turned round, pen in hand.

‘What’s the matter, Evelyn?’ she asked, in the slow, large voice which, like many Irish organs, sounded as though the parts of speech had been well oiled before use.

‘The matter? Oh, nothing! Why do you ask?’

Evelyn’s usually pleasant tones had an unwonted sharpness in them to-day, which did not escape her stepmother’s notice.

‘Girls don’t usually throw about their flowers, and—what shall I call it?—use unparliamentary language over them for nothing.’ There was a dash of vinegar amongst the oil. ‘It’s anything but lady-like, my dear, to say the very least. And what a time you’ve been. I have been expecting you to finish and to offer me a little help with these notes for the last half-hour. After what’s happened at the Hall it’s impossible for our sale of work to take place at present. It was to be in the grounds, you know. And, that having been the arrangement, it wouldn’t look well to have it anywhere for some time to come. Poor Mrs. Clavering might think it unfeeling; don’t you think so?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ snapped Evelyn. The association between the little white cross under her fingers and the etiquette necessary to the nice balance between sales of work and the feelings of a bereaved mother was too jarring to her already overstrung nerves, and she felt hardly responsible for her words. ‘The whole thing’s too sad to be talked about. This cross is ready now; I think I’ll take it to the churchyard at once.’

She got up, sweeping aside the remains of her flowers, as she did so, with a gesture of smarting impatience. Her

stepmother lifted a large white hand, on the fingers of which flashed some highly aristocratic old family rings in settings as worn and ancient as the family.

‘You forget the notes, Evelyn,’ she said, with injured remonstrance in her voice. ‘Surely, the flowers will wait till more important things are disposed of? The living should take precedence of the dead, my dear. Besides, Mr. Meredith might call, and——’

‘Oh, do, for goodness’ sake, let me alone, Madre,’ cried the girl, with a gasp which was like a sob. ‘What has Mr. Meredith got to do with it? Do you think I could neglect poor little Bertie for either notes or callers? Besides, I don’t think it’s in the least likely Mr. Meredith will come. And if he does, I——’

She broke off with another gasp, and rushed out of the room by one door as her father entered by the other.

The Canon stared from daughter to wife with trouble in his smooth, bland face.

‘Why, what’s the matter with Evelyn, my lady?’ he said.

Lady Margaret frowned. ‘That’s just what I’ve been asking her,’ she said, her rings flashing viciously as she shuffled a sheaf of notes. ‘But there’s little need to ask. One knows what’s generally the matter with girls when they have an attack of the nerves. Mr. Meredith’s long in coming to the point, I suspect.’

‘Mr. Meredith? Do you really think there’s anything between them?’ asked the Canon, smoothing down his clerical waistcoat with one fat hand, as was his wont in moments of doubt and annoyance. ‘I don’t like to think of it, I don’t indeed; we know nothing of the man.’

‘Except that everyone says he’s very well off,’ answered Lady Margaret. ‘He’ll have to state his position to you, of course. But, given the money, a little vagueness as to

family might be allowed for in a Colonial. Evelyn can't expect everything, without a fortune as she is.'

'Still, I don't *like* it, my dear. And I wonder to hear you talk so, with your views as to birth. Well, I only hope there's nothing in it. I'd not willingly cross my little lass, if her heart should be set on the fellow. And pleasant enough he is, I will say that. Still——'

The Canon's hand told his waistcoat the rest ; for his tongue fell silent, as his wife's pen resumed its shrill monologue with the note-paper.

Evelyn, meanwhile, had caught up her garden-hat, and, hot and quivering in cheeks and nerves, had carried the little white cross, as on a whirlwind, across the garden and into the churchyard. Still, and cool, and quiet it was in there, under the shade of the old yews and the bee-haunted limes. Rank on rank, the dead slept, with their faces to the east, under green counterpanes embroidered with daisies, while the river sang them a never-ending lullaby as it swept past the only corner of the earth to which these departed dwellers in Hatherlea Bridge could still lay claim. She found the pompous-looking granite erection which covered the vault of the Claverings, with its urn on the top and its emblems and inscriptions on the sides, and laid on it the little offering which she had brought for its latest inhabitant. Pathetic, indeed, looked the fragile flowers in their fragrant whiteness upon the grim, grey prison-house, whose stones were as solidly fitted together as though the object were to prevent those entering its door from ever coming out again, even at the summons of the Resurrection trumpet. The thought of little Bertie—so young, so bright, so buoyant—shut in there from sun and breeze and sky, brought a lump into Evelyn's throat, and the tears to her eyes. They fell, hot and fast, upon the flowers, in a summer shower of passionate protest, which was not all for

the dead boy, but, partly, as well, for the living girl, though the shedder of them would hardly have owned to the double cause. '*Sic transit gloria mundi*'—this inscription, beneath a grinning skull and cross-bones, among others on what the old sexton called 'the mossollium,' swam rainbow-like before Evelyn's eyes, causing her to shiver as in a cold air from the tomb. Why must all pass—Hope, Love, Youth, Happiness—all that is best and most beautiful in the world? She asked herself the question with an aching heart, but could find no answer; for Evelyn, like many another to whom grief is a new acquaintance, looked to Death for her answer, and not to Life. Nor did she consider the parable, when two butterflies, one sulphur the other azure, attracted by the flowers, fluttered for a while above them, settled for an instant on the skull, to mount, finally, heavenward, and be lost to sight in the spaces of sunny blue. Yet she watched them, though to no purpose now but that Memory, perhaps, might store up the sight in her treasure-house, thence to be brought out again for purposes of future comfort and instruction in the mysteries of Life.

The sound of a spade behind her and the '*heuch!*' of breath emitted from an ancient chest through violent exertion, roused Evelyn, and made her turn quickly, to see the old sexton behind her beginning upon a new grave.

'Mornin', mum!' he said, leaning upon his spade and peering curiously into her tear-stained face. 'Here's anither to plant—an auld tree, this time. It's howk, howk, howk, week by week, to get them arl in their places, no' joost are Hatherlea folk, ye ken, but them that used to flourish here, forbye, who maun e'en coom back to rot. It was a pity aboot wor yoong squire! But if ye ken'd as mickle aboot deith as mesel', ye wadna waste yer tears. Why, dear sakes,

what hev Ah said ? She's off like a swallie ! Weel, weel !' The old fellow began to howk again.

Evelyn, meanwhile, despairing of being alone anywhere near the village, and thirsting for space and solitude, fled away up the hill-side path which led to the moors. The girl was in that state when a word is as a touch on the raw. She had scarcely seen Meredith since the day when Miss Teresa had interrupted his avowal. That he had abstained from completing his declaration, in view of the tragedy at Hatherlea, had seemed only right and natural to her. 'He will wait till after the funeral,' she said to herself ; and, on the day which followed it, her heart had beaten every time a step came up the Rectory walk, for she felt certain that this was her lover hastening to find her.

But that day had passed, and here was the noon of the next, and still he had not come. There was, certainly, no haste on his part to go on and finish what he had seemed so eager to begin. Maybe, he already regretted his hasty declaration, if hasty it were. Leisure had brought repentance, and he was glad of the chance which had pulled him up sharp in the midst of unintentional speech of a definite order. He had no real purpose, probably, concerning her. She was but the object of a little amusement, such as men call 'harmless.' She was a fool to have taken him seriously ; and yet—— The girl's face burnt as she thought of what that 'and yet' meant to her, and inward exasperation drove her, ever faster, uphill. In her young strength it was at least some small relief to put forth all her physical powers to breast the steep incline. She felt herself fleeing from something which was driving her to desperation, and the effort served, for a time, to keep the swarm of stinging mental gnats at bay which were buzzing round her mind. They stung her, indeed, but not as they would do when her body should be at rest.

The sun grew hotter. She was glad to enter the fir-plantation, where, at least, she was conscious of shade. It lay black athwart the gold upon the needle-strewn path, scented darkness alternating with fragrant light, as the sunshine stretched long fingers through the branches overhead. Squirrels chased each other from tree to tree, or sat aloft nibbling fir-cones and dropping their little brown crumbs upon the green and golden moss which cushioned the feet of the firs. Wood-pigeons kept up a drowsy 'coo-cooing' in the blue shadow of the boughs; and, now hiding coyly, now flashing white and pearl-flecked into sight, the brown burn, which had kept Gilbert Clavering company in his misery, not so long ago, now sang and whispered beside the girl for whose heart he would have given everything he possessed, while she had given it to another, only, as she thought, to find it flung away as worthless.

Near the top of the path there was a rock, fretted and traceried with silver-grey lichen. It was formed something in the fashion of a rustic chair, with back and seat, and was a favourite resting-place with Evelyn Hesketh on those days when she escaped from the petty worries of the Rectory to the larger life of the woods. By the time she reached it she was so hot and out of breath that, without so much as balancing the question, she threw herself down to rest. But of rest there was none for her; for, no sooner was her body still than her mind began to work the harder, as minds have a trick of doing under the circumstances. Those stinging gnats of tormenting thought, and recollection, and fore-shadowing fancy, fastened upon her in their swarms, and drove her nearly distracted with their pricks. Shame, Grief, Love given in vain—these are the names of but a few of those torments of the mind. Oh, what misery to be a girl, at the mercy of any man who might choose to single her his amusement and win her affections, as a dilettante

gambler wins gold pieces, merely to pass the time and to keep his hand in ! Evelyn clenched her hand and set her teeth, as she pictured herself talked about and speculated on, as her step-mother had done, that morning. Everyone must have seen the game ; everyone must know that one player in it, at least, had been in deadly earnest, that her heart was in it, whatever might be the case of the man who was playing with her. She was to stay in, lest Meredith should call ! She was to wait for and expect him, and be ready to take what he chose to count out to her, whenever he pleased to do it. And if he never came at all, as now she felt sure he never would, she must be content to wear the willow for everyone to see. She, Evelyn Hesketh, who, till now, had held herself so proudly above such things as courtships and love-fancies—she was to be pointed out to all the neighbourhood as ‘the girl who had had a disappointment’ ; ‘the girl who rushed into the arms of a stranger,’ and so merely ‘got what she deserved.’ It was too humiliating. She raged and stormed against the situation with all the vehemence of her proud young heart. But, alas, humiliation was not all. If raging and storming could have finished the matter, it would have proved the trouble to be skin deep, and, therefore, speedily curable. The worst of it was that Evelyn cared about the man who had wounded and robbed her, and left her by the highway, half dead, to recover or not as she could. He had the first love-roses of her heart—he had pretended to desire them as precious treasure, so that she had given him all she had ; and now her tree was bare, and only the thorns remained. As the waters from a broken dam, so did the waves of her trouble sweep down upon her heart, and, in the sheer black misery of the very young, Evelyn Hesketh hid her face in her hands and burst into sobs and tears.

A step coming up the path was not heard by her till

the climber was quite near. Then she looked up in terror, and turned blood-red to see Meredith himself. She looked round, like a frightened creature of the woods, to see where she might find cover, and was plunging blindly among the trees and bracken, which skirted the path, when he put out his hand and caught hold of her.

‘Evelyn !’ he said, ‘Evelyn ! Don’t run away from me, dear ; I’ve got something to say.’

Why he had not said it sooner Meredith did not mention ; nor did he allude to what was really the truth, that he had come up here, not with any definite purpose of saying his say to this girl, but of debating with himself whether or not he should or could keep silence. As for expecting to find Evelyn by the way, of that he had had no idea. But, having found her, and found her as he had, opportunity, as usual with Meredith, proved too strong, and turned to definite action what had before been indefinite and nebulous thought. Her tears swept him away on a tide of passion and pity, as tears sweep most men, whether of Meredith’s temperament, or of a make of mind which is just the opposite, provided the shedder of them is in any way calculated to work upon their feelings. And, in this case, the man really loved the girl with all the force of which he was capable. He was all but ready to give his soul to possess the right to dry her tears. The only question had been whether he dared actually pay such a price ; or, having paid it, whether, the girl being what she was, he might not, should she ever discover the transaction, find that he had nothing in return.

Questions of this sort, however, are apt to be forgotten when the tides of passion are setting round the casuist, especially when he is of Meredith’s fibre. In another moment he had drawn her unresisting figure to his breast, and, with one arm about her waist, was kissing away her tears.

‘ Evie, darling,’ he whispered, almost as softly as the cushats were doing to their mates, ‘ what is it, sweetheart ? Who has made you cry ? There, never mind ! You shall never cry again ; or, if you do, it shall be here on my shoulder. For I never mean to let you go again. You are mine, dearest, for ever. Eh ? Come, let the sobs be still, and then tell me I am right. It is “ yes,” is it not ? “ Yes,” “ yes,” “ yes ! ” ’

And though he answered for her, Evelyn Hesketh did not contradict her sponsor. With a long sigh, which was still almost half a sob, though there was no more sorrow in it, but only the long-drawn breathing of exquisite relief, she let her head, like that of a rose too heavy with recent rain to be held aloft any longer, sink upon her lover’s breast.

After all, he wanted her ; after all, her love had not been given in vain. In her infinite content it never so much as occurred to this frank-hearted country maiden to ask why this now so passionate wooer had been so very long in coming to claim his heart’s desire.

And Meredith ? Ah, well, if, in the late afternoon, he went once more across the bridge, after a tender parting with this ‘ golden girl ’ (as to himself he called her), bearing a heart and conscience not altogether in harmony and at peace, he determined to leave all scruples in the river. For that afternoon had settled the matter so long in debate. The Rubicon was crossed for good and all, and, he told himself, that what he had bought with the sacrifice of ‘ scruple ’ was very well worth the price.

CHAPTER XXII

A WORD OF WARNING

Had I erred
In being too happy? Would she set me straight?
For she, being wise and good and born above
The flats I had never climbed from, could perceive
If such as I might grow upon the hills.

E. B. BROWNING: *Aurora Leigh*.

MEREDITH, accordingly, appeared before Canon Hesketh, next morning, as his daughter's accepted suitor. And, spite of former objections, was accepted both by him and Lady Margaret; for no reason could be found for refusing him—his statement of his position appearing eminently satisfactory from a monetary point of view. That of his birth, though a good deal less so, by reason chiefly of Meredith's own vagueness as to the possession of such proofs of respectability as grandfathers and grandmothers, was rather a case of omission than commission. For, if Evelyn's suitor could produce no honourable ancestry, he at least seemed equally free of dishonourable forbears, who, as often as not, are a blot on a 'lang pedigree.' His father, at any rate—though even he had departed this life almost as soon as his son had entered it—was above suspicion, he being that universally esteemed progenitor—'a clergyman of the Church of England,' who, as everyone allows, is a certificate of respectability, *ex-officio*, for every child he may beget.

Even Lady Margaret, stickler though she was in the

matter of ancestry, allowed that he might pass muster ; a stepmother, of course, being less difficult in such matters than a mother is forced to be.

Moreover, though Meredith's statements had only his own word to support them, they received a substantial solidity from the fact of his announced intention to be a purchaser of the Hatherlea Estate as soon as ever it should come into the market. Gilbert Clavering had already left the North to join the South African volunteers, leaving instructions with a firm of solicitors in Newcastle to look after his affairs, and, if possible, dispose of all the landed property which had so tragically come into his possession. To keep it up, as it should be kept, was, he knew, impossible to him, after payment of Mrs. Clavering's jointure. And even had he had the means, he was very far from having the inclination ; the very sight of the old place being, at that time, so distasteful to its involuntary possessor.

For Evelyn to be established as mistress of Hatherlea Hall was in itself a recommendation of the man who declared himself willing to place her there. And what better guarantee of respectability and solidity can any loving parent desire from a son-in-law, than the possession of a landed estate ?

It was only a pity that some time must elapse before this glorious consummation of the engagement could be looked for. There was much to be done first, not only on the spot, but in South Africa, whither Meredith announced his intention of returning at once to wind up his affairs in that country. A year must elapse before he could obtain possession of Hatherlea Hall, supposing his offer to be accepted, and, meanwhile, it seemed better not to hasten the marriage.

He and his betrothed parted accordingly, with, as it

seemed, the sunniest of prospects before them ; and, though Evelyn knew that nine months at least must pass before she could see her future husband again, she let him go with a confident heart and a store of contented happiness and satisfied love on which to feed during his absence. And so the months sped by, bringing rain and snow, dark days and bright in their train, till Christmas and New Year lay behind, and Lent had come to place its restraining hand upon the inordinate desires and carnal appetites of mankind. Not that Hatherlea Bridge, especially Hatherlea Rectory, felt the hand of Lent in any way heavily. But, then, such folk as Canon Hesketh and his belongings have, apparently, less need of such restraints than the ordinary run of Christians, inordinate desires and carnal appetites being weaknesses from which the dignitaries of the Church are, presumably, free.

The March wind was swaying the branches of the elms in the avenue of Hatherlea Hall against a pale blue sky, and sending the rooks see-saw, as they sat in consultation concerning their annual architectural repairs, when, one afternoon about tea-time, Evelyn Hesketh, with a letter in her hand, came hurrying to the door. She went in without troubling either bell or butler, and ran upstairs towards her friend's little sitting-room, two steps at a time, a thing she had tried religiously to abstain from since she had stood in the position of prospective mistress of the Hall. For she dreaded the effects of the shock on old Thomas should she be betrayed into such a breach of decorum after her marriage with his master that was to be. To-day, however, all considerations of etiquette were forgotten in her haste to share the news contained in her letter with the confidante of her girlish joys and sorrows. She burst, breezy and fresh as the March wind itself, into Rose Clavering's rose-coloured sanctum, causing the crape-draped

figure upon the sofa to shrink a little in fear of crushing from the stormy embrace of her friend.

‘Well, Evie, what is it? Yes, crape *is* a little in need of care—not that I shall wear it *much* longer now. But one *does* like to look tidy, even when one is dressed in weeds. Mr. Meredith coming home in June? Ah, yes, you expected him about then, didn’t you? You will be able to fix the wedding-day. And, as for me, I will make my final arrangements for retiring in your favour. That’s the way of the world, isn’t it? One in, one out, like the little figures in the weather-house.’

The widow sighed as she glanced at the toy barometer, representing a Swiss cottage, which had belonged to little Bertie.

Evelyn knelt beside the sofa, and fondled her friend’s small hand. For Evelyn, breezy and downright in most things, had a tenderness about her, where her heart was concerned, which prompted her to a larger display of her affections than is usual in natures such as hers.

‘Now, Rose, don’t talk like that, or you will spoil it all and make me feel horrid,’ she said, coaxingly. ‘You know Claude said you are not to move till the dower-house in Hexham is quite ready for you. There’ll be plenty of time to put things to rights here while we are away on our wedding tour; for’—she coloured charmingly, as she sank her eyes to her friend’s crape flounces—‘he wants to be married the last week in June, just as soon as possible after he lands; and we’re to go to Switzerland afterwards. Switzerland! Think of that, a country I’ve always wanted to see. Isn’t it all like a dream?’

‘Well, I don’t know; it begins to seem very real. I hate the idea of moving,’ was the rather fretful reply. ‘But,’ suddenly brightening, ‘what about the clothes?’

You'll have to begin with them at once. You'll wear white satin, I suppose ?'

'Yes ; but my gown will need no planning—I shall wear my mother's, and her family lace.'

'Oh, no, Evie, surely not ; so unlucky, you know.'

'No, I don't, and I don't care either,' was the girl's decided reply. 'She would like to know I was married in her wedding-gown. And, besides' (the golden eyes ceased to shine, and grew veiled and inward), 'it will be like having a part of her beside me. You know what I mean, Rose ?'

But the widow did not. Sentiments such as these were not among those she kept in stock. Her collection was more purely personal.

'It's not at all the sort of thing I should have expected from a sensible, present-day girl like you, Evie,' she said, with remonstrance in her cooing voice, which hardly suited with it. 'The gown will be terribly musty and old-fashioned. It'll have to be totally remodelled, and will, probably, cost as much as a new one. Besides, the ill-luck ! You know what they say——'

'I don't care ! I don't care ! Good-luck or bad-luck, mother's gown goes with me to church—and her blessing with it, I hope.' The last words were uttered softly ; and Evelyn looked wistfully at her friend, as though craving for that sympathy which could never come to her from such a woman of the world as Rose Clavering ; though the younger woman, blinded by her girlish liking for the pretty, soft being who had attracted her—more through pity for her state than through anything they had in common—was always expecting to receive it. It was a curious friendship, this, between the shallow widow and the deep-hearted maid ; and yet, given the ages of the two and their respective circumstances, the tie which bound them together

was not so uncommon. On Evelyn's side it was founded on an illusion. Full of sympathy for her undoubted misfortunes, the girl had idealised the woman, put her upon a pedestal and worshipped her with that ardent devotion to an ideal of their own creation which is the habit of young girls of large hearts and inexperienced heads. As for Rose Clavering, a woman who had, all her life, claimed admiration and attention, the girl's devotion was as sweet incense to her vanity and self-love. Not so sweet, certainly, as that of a man of any sort. But feminine incense may serve to fill the place of the masculine article with women of Mrs. Clavering's calibre, at times when the stronger variety is unobtainable. Rose Clavering could not have existed without a worshipper, any more than could a god; she must have tumbled from her pedestal from sheer lack of support, like Dagon, had she found herself so neglected.

'Well, we'll leave your costume for the present,' said the widow, ignoring, or failing to perceive, the appeal in the golden eyes of her admiring friend. 'What about the bridesmaids' dresses, have you thought of them?'

'No; I wanted to consult you,' was the answer, 'you've such good taste, Rose. Madre thinks pink and white muslin, and pink and white briars, the proper things for June. But that's just a little like what everybody else has at midsummer, isn't it?'

'Of course it is; you mustn't follow the beaten track in this case, whatever you may do in others. As a rule, you're too fond of by-paths, my dear. But wedding-clothes need a little originality, or they become monotonous, and as palling as the wedding-cake. When I marry again—supposing I am ever so deluded as to trust in man again!—I'll avoid that huge monstrosity, and go in for iced macaroons, which can disagree with nobody. I remember feeling quite—— But we were talking of clothes, not cakes.

Let me see : what would you say to the palest of green oriental silk, with water-lilies, and large white hats ? That would look cool and refreshing, wouldn't it ?'

'Certainly it would—on a hot day. But supposing it rains, Rose ? Wouldn't the water-lilies give us the shivers ?'

'But it *won't* rain, Eve—not on your wedding-day ; you are bound to have the sunshine.'

'Well, then, we'll have the water-nymphs. I'll leave you to plan them out.'

'Yes ; and I'll honour you by throwing aside my weeds for the occasion, my dear. I'll go into grey—it suits me charmingly—with little touches of white *crêpe de Chine*. I shall look like a bride myself—in the second edition—bound like that, eh, Evie ?' Mrs. Clavering's soft eyes looked up, with melting inquiry, at her friend. But Evelyn was too much occupied with her own matrimonial concerns to suspect anything of such a nature under the widow's pathetic jesting.

'It must be a little painful to you, all this, dear Rose,' she answered, stroking her friend's soft hand. 'Don't let me drag you out of your mourning before you feel inclined. You always look nice, you know—as nice in black as in anything, I think.'

'Oh, but I couldn't appear as a mourner at your wedding, dear !' exclaimed the widow, with some eagerness. 'I might bring you misfortune. No, I shall wear grey on the occasion—and, maybe, I'll keep to it till I go into colours again ; I don't approve of women of my age mourning for ever when their husbands are taken from them. It's un-Christian, as I think. Do you remember what the dear Canon said in his sermon, last Sunday, on the folly of sorrowing without hope ? Well, I quite agree with him. "Hope on, hope ever"—that is my favourite motto.

And, as for my sweet little Bertie, he never could bear to see me in black. So I'm sure *he* wouldn't mind. By the way Eve, what is your opinion of second marriage ?'

The girl flushed up. Her eyes shone. 'I never can understand anyone marrying twice—unless it was all a mistake the first time. But why do you ask, Rose ? Surely——' She hesitated and looked distressed.

'What—you think I was speaking of myself ?' coo'd the widow, averting her face a little. 'Well, that's jumping a little too fast to conclusions, isn't it, dear ? I'll confess I've never taken such strong views on the matter as you have, Evie. I can see that, in certain circumstances, a woman would be more than justified in accepting such protection. We're feeble folk, we women, and not fitted to stand alone. You don't agree with me ? Oh, well, never mind ! We needn't discuss the matter, since it's *your* marriage that's on the *tapis* at present, not mine. You're going ? Well, good-bye, darling. Come back to-morrow, and I'll show you my device for the bridesmaids' dresses. What's that ? Someone coming upstairs ? I told Thomas I couldn't see anyone while you were here. So stupid of him ! Oh, Mr. Tinniswood ; so it's you ! How kind of you to come.'

She half rose from her reclining position to give the lawyer her hand, over which he bowed with his usual exaggeration of respect.

'A little business to transact with my fair client, Miss Hesketh,' said Mr. Tinniswood, turning to Evelyn, who was preparing to leave the room. 'Mr. Meredith has behaved most handsomely—I may say with the very greatest generosity and consideration. Though he buys the property, the dower-house is to be hers for life—or, at any rate, as long as she wants it. Eh, Mrs. Clavering ? No secrets between you and your friend, I'm sure !'

He beamed on both ladies with one large inclusive smile, as he opened the door for Evelyn.

'Well, good-bye, my dear Miss Hesketh ; I congratulate you on your future husband.'

'What a horrible creature that is !' thought Evie, as she ran downstairs. 'I can't think how Rose can endure him ! But, I suppose, she must, on account of business. Still, to allow him to kiss her hand ! It's too detestable. But Rose is incomprehensible at times.'

On the steps of the front-door Evelyn came face to face with Miss Williamson.

'You can save yourself the trouble of going in, dear Miss Maria,' she said, slipping her hand through her old friend's arm, and turning her face towards the avenue. 'Rose is closeted with *that* Mr. Tinniswood. What an insufferable bounder he is ! But she has to put up with him in the course of business. Never mind. I shall reap the benefit of her loss, since I secure you on the walk back. I've some news for you, dear. What do you think it is ?'

'I'm a bad one to guess, Eve. Something about Mr. Meredith, is it ?' said the elder lady, smiling sympathetically in the face of the younger with her mild, milky-blue eyes.

'Not such a bad guesser, after all, Miss Maria !' Evelyn was beaming and sparkling, sure of sympathy, this time ; for her old friend had the softest of soft hearts where love and marriage are concerned.

'Yes ; I've heard from Claude. He's coming home in June, and—— Well, you and Miss Teresa may set to work at once on your wedding-gowns !' Face and eyes glowed as the girl said the words. She pressed the elder lady's arm with both her hands. 'Tell me you're glad,' she said, in her warmly vehement way. 'Wish me good

luck, you dear old thing, for I'm the happiest girl in the world.'

Miss Williamson stood still under the swaying elms, took the girl's neatly-gloved hand between her own black cotton-clad palms, and held it there, while her milky-blue eyes grew more liquid than usual in the soft evening light.

'I'm sure, my dear, I wish you all possible happiness, she said, in a voice which thrilled a little, like an old harp-string. 'But, dearie, are you quite, *quite* sure your marriage is made in the Lord? It's a serious question, isn't it? How serious none knows better than myself. I've many a time had it laid upon me to ask you; but I couldn't, somehow, bring myself to it.' The crushed bonnet-strings trembled a little to the wire-like thrill of the earnest voice. 'But now my chance is come. There's still time, my dear; and if you're not quite, *quite* sure that your promised husband is—is a really Christian man, such as your father's daughter may firmly trust herself to, it might be better to hesitate, even now. Perhaps, you think, as an old maid, I know nothing at all about such things. But I do. I've had my experience, and that is what makes me so full of sympathy and concern for others. You mightn't think it of a plain old woman, like myself, and I've never told a soul about it before; but it's true, my dearie, nevertheless.'

The old lady paused, tremulous, and sadly out of breath. Evelyn felt chilled; but she would not show it to her old friend. She knew better than to pain her by resenting a warning which was so evidently conscientious. She ignored it, however, and only answered the personal information.

'Nay, Miss Maria, dear,' she said gently, 'I'm not a bit surprised. You're so sweet that it would have been a wonder if no one had appreciated you. But, tell me why it came to nothing. Did he die?'

‘No, my dear, not that. It was worse than death—I found out that he was unworthy. And, then, of course, no choice was left me. But I’ll tell you the story, though, as I said, I’ve never mentioned it to anyone before. It happened when I was little more than a girl, though after the time that Teresa and I lost our parents and came to live here. I was away on a visit at a country house when I met him. It was a case of mutual attraction, I think. Anyway, he asked me to marry him, and I said “yes,” though I’d only known him a fortnight. I was very happy for some days after; as happy as you, my dear. Then I discovered that he was no true Christian—I don’t mean exactly an infidel, but a man of no faith and no principles; and so ——’ Her voice shook, and she came to a sudden standstill, looking wistfully up at her listener with those pathetic old blue eyes.

‘You gave him up?’ put in the girl. ‘Oh, Miss Maria, how could you, if you loved him?’

‘How could I?’—the soft old face and quavering voice grew suddenly stern—‘How could I help it, Evie? You know what the Bible says? It forbids us Christians to yoke ourselves unequally with unbelievers. We are not to marry, except in the Lord. I had no choice but to do as I did.’

‘And the man?’

Miss Maria sighed. ‘Poor fellow, he was very much cut up,’ she said, feelingly. ‘He tried hard to argue me out of my decision; and I found it difficult to stand firm, for I loved him all the time. But, thank God, I resisted the temptation. Captain Ford went away ——’ Miss Maria came to a sudden halt. ‘Ah,’ she went on, in distress and confusion, ‘I’ve mentioned his name! I never meant to. You’ll keep that and the story to yourself, won’t you, Evie? Even Teresa has never heard of it.’

'Of course I will.' The girl took her old friend's hand, and caressed it gently. 'I'm so sorry for you, dear Miss Maria. It must have been so hard.'

'It was. I didn't get over it for a long, long time; but God helped me through. He would help you, too, my dear, if it were necessary. You are quite, quite sure all is right about Mr. Meredith?'

'Oh, yes! You needn't fear for me, my dear old friend. I'm sure Claude is just the best man in the world. No, no, I'm not offended; I know your kindness as well as your conscience too well for that, you most unworldly of women! Well, don't let us stand any longer under the elms for the rooks to wonder at and comment upon. It's cold.'

They went on their way, Evelyn talking determinately about other things. She would not allow, even to herself, that Miss Maria had any grounds for her warning. Nevertheless, when she had left the old lady and was crossing the high-backed bridge to the Rectory, the girl felt her spirits no longer at high-water mark, as they had been when she crossed it before.

She stopped to lean over the parapet at the place where she and her lover had stood on that August day, seven months ago, and shuddered a little as she watched the wind wrinkling the surface of the river and sending shivers across its pools. Her heart felt a shiver run across it, also, as at the chill of some wind of misgiving. Was she so sure of Meredith, after all

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LOVE THAT CASTS OUT FEAR

Only the waters that in perfect stillness lie
Give back an undistorted image of the sky

ABP. TRENCH : *A Century of Couplets*

It was on the most golden of evenings, when high summer reigned in glory over Hatherlea Bridge and its crowning moors, that Claude Meredith came back.

The man's spirits were steeped in pleasant expectation as was the world in sunshine, when he crossed the bridge from station to Rectory. He had ordered his luggage to go to the inn. As for himself he could not wait even to snatch a meal, though he had travelled right through from Southampton without resting, to be in time for his wedding, which was fixed for the following morning. To see his bride, to hold her in his arms and kiss her sweet face, was what he panted for more than anything in the world. Hunger and thirst of a prosaic sort were as nothing till love's needs were satisfied.

Yet, as he crossed the bridge, he, like most other people, stopped to look at the water. It pleased him, before drinking freely of love's full cup, to remember—to taste, as it were, over again—those first sips he had had in the previous summer. He pictured Evelyn standing with him on this same bridge, a goodly, honest, open-hearted girl, of such a type as he had never before encountered. He felt himself, once more, falling over head and ears in love with her,

almost at first sight, and thrilled at the vision of love reflected back from her sweet, frank eyes.

Over the flashing face of the river the swallows were hawking, just as they had done on the afternoon when he had first met Evelyn Hesketh. The bare-footed urchins were wading in the shallows and the cows cooling their hoofs and flicking away the flies with their tails from their dappled sides. The church clock struck seven. How well he remembered its pleasant voice—pleasant as that of an old friend, though there was a little jar, as of cracked metal, in the tone. There was the scent of roses and seringa in the air which blew across the Rectory garden. Those Maréchal Niels, doubtless, were breathing into it. He smiled as he recalled his request and his sweetheart's words when she handed him the rose he had vowed was like herself.

And now the living, breathing rose was to be his at last, his, to wear to the end of life. No wonder Claude Meredith's heart swelled and throbbed at the prospect. There was not room in it, just then, for a single regret concerning the price he had paid for his bargain. In fact, of late, Claude's conscience had given him but few twinges on that score. He had done as he had determined, and by acting 'generously' towards the widow of his friend and giving her the full portion that would have fallen to her by law of her husband's possessions, he had salved his conscience concerning the rest. Gilbert Clavering was out of the way : as likely as not he would never be in it. Where so many were falling daily by sword and shot, he might fall also, and go where neither money nor lands can be carried by anybody. 'For the sword devoureth one as well as another.'

Meantime, Meredith would have Evelyn Hesketh to wife, and, once secured, she would still be his even though Clavering should claim all else.

Evelyn's bridegroom took his arms from the parapet,

dusted the sleeves where they had picked up some bits of grey lichen from the stone, and went on his way to the Rectory.

He was shown into the drawing-room, where the Canon and Lady Margaret were sitting, waiting for the dinner-bell to ring. But Claude had no eyes for his future parents-in-law; they went round the room at once in search of Evelyn. Canon Hesketh laughed good-humouredly.

'She's in the garden,' he said, 'she wanted a rose to wear.'

The words were hardly out of the Canon's mouth before Meredith was out of the window.

Lady Margaret frowned.

'They don't teach manners in the Colonies, it seems,' she said in her most acid manner. 'I wish he were more of a gentleman.'

'Never mind'—the Canon was rubbing his hands—'never mind his manners. He's ardent if he isn't polite. And that's what I like to see. Young men take these things so coolly, as a rule, nowadays; one would think they considered they were doing the girls a favour when they condescend to offer matrimony. But whatever faults Claude Meredith may have, lukewarmness isn't one of them. He's devoted to my lassie, and can think of nothing else, that's evident.'

'Still, he might remember she has relations,' returned Lady Margaret stiffly. 'It isn't necessary for a man to be rude when he's in love. But as it's *your* daughter that he's going to marry, not mine, if *you're* satisfied with his behaviour it's not for me to object.'

The Canoness snapped her thin lips together, and took up the paper to show the Canon that, so far as she was concerned, the subject was closed. And he, who had learnt, somewhat painfully, to read the signs of the times, as dis-

played by his aristocratic spouse, accepted the last word at her lips and strolled to the window to see if Meredith were still in sight. But Love, as all the world allows, has wings ; and those same wings had already conveyed the bridegroom elect into a more congenial presence than that of the elderly pair, who, if Love had ever troubled his head to visit them, had dismissed him long ago as a creature of insufficient dignity for the society of those who called themselves ' dignitaries of the Church.'

Evelyn was standing leaning over the boundary fence with her back to him when Meredith came into the rose-garden. It was the very place in which he had pictured her, scores of times, when he was away in Africa. Her position, also, was just the same as that he remembered on the first occasion on which he had dared to hint at love. Moreover, she wore the same dress. Was it put on on purpose for him, he wondered ? He came softly behind her, intending to take her in his arms before she was aware of his presence. But, before he could do so, she turned, her face shining as with the brightness of the sun, whose setting she had been watching, and, with a soft cry of delight, sprang to meet him, and laid her head upon his breast with a frank abandonment which was the very embodiment of loving confidence. Meredith held her there in speechless rapture. She was his, utterly and for ever, as he felt ; his, almost as surely as though the ring were upon the hand which clasped his own. Evelyn was like a child in such things. When she gave her love and confidence, she gave them outright, not being the girl to do anything by halves. But the very perfectness of her trust had in it a sting that, all unknown to herself, was ready to stab the man to whom she had given it. The first moment of rapture unalloyed was followed by a painful stirring of his guilty conscience. It stirred in its sleep as it had not done for many a long day, and the disturbance

was caused by nothing more terrible than the lifting to his of a pair of candid eyes. Evelyn raised her head from his breast and looked full at her lover, as though she would look into the depths of his heart and soul. And why should she not? To her he was as Galahad.

But Claude's eyes refused to meet her look; the lids quivered and fell, as though in fear of what she might see. He drew her head down again and stroked her tawny hair to mask his own confusion. But Evelyn had her own way of doing things, and was not to be put out of it so easily, even by her future lord. She lifted her head again, with a little air of mutiny, and returned to the survey of her lover's face.

'You're a regular Africander, Claude,' she said gaily; 'or shall I say, a Boer?—as brown as the sun can make you! I only hope you haven't learnt any slimness among those gentry. If you have, I shall disown you at once!'

Again there was that flicker of the man's eyelids. But the girl was too full of happy confidence to remark it, or to hear so much as a semitone of falseness in the ring of the laugh with which he answered:

'A nice thing for a bride to say to her groom on the eve of the wedding-day! Don't forget that you take me for better or for worse, you little critic! Are you afraid of discoveries after matrimony? Well, there's still time to send me about my business—if you can!'

'If I can?' She repeated the words with all her heart in her candid eyes. 'That's just it, Claude, you have me fast. I am as much at your mercy as a thrush in the claws of a hawk'—she pointed to a little heap of mottled feathers on the ground, which bespoke a recent tragedy in the winged world. 'It's well I can trust you out and out, and through and through, for there's no escape for me now.'

The tawny head, shining like red gold in the long soft

beams of the dipping sun, was laid again upon his breast, with a long-drawn sigh of perfect confidence and content.

But Meredith's heart smote him. Was he not a villain to deceive such trust as this? What if she were ever to discover what was hidden in the breast against which she was resting so confidently? But she never should—he vowed she never should. Yet, all that night, Meredith was in a fever of uneasiness. His sleep was disturbed by dreams of something slipping from him—of Evelyn snatched from his side just as he was putting the ring on to her finger; of dead men who came between them and forbade the marriage. It was not till the ceremony was over, next morning—as over it was, with the most prosaic following of uneventful precedent, before the old-fashioned hour of noon, for Hatherlea Bridge is very conservative, and looks with suspicion on new-fangled arrangements—that Meredith was able to draw breath with any sort of comfort.

As Miss Teresa observed: 'The bridegroom was much more nervous than the bride, wasn't he, Maria? Did you observe how his hand shook as he was putting on the ring? I thought he would never get it over her finger, and that she would have to help him, which would have been a shocking thing for a bride to do—almost as shocking as helping the man to propose—though there *are* women who do that too, I believe! As for Evie, she was as cool as a cucumber—as unruffled as a newly-ironed table-cloth. She's such a queer girl—I can never rightly make her out; for I've seen her as nervous as anyone at times—and you would have thought her own wedding would have been such a one. But no!'

'She's so very sure of him, you see, dear,' answered Miss Maria thoughtfully; 'she loves him with all her heart, and "perfect love casteth out fear," as we are told. If he ever deceives her it will be almost like decoying a child to

its death. I wish I were as sure of him as she is ! I can see no signs of true religion about him.'

'Religion ? I should think not !' scoffed the worldly Miss Williamson. 'He knows no more how to behave in church than his dog Warlock. I can see he has to watch other people to know when it's time to get up or sit down, and his knees are as stiff as pokers ; he won't wear out his trousers at *that* part, anyhow. But he has money ; and money covers a multitude of sins, even from the eyes of a church dignitary. No, Maria, I won't be quiet, so don't shake your head at me ! As for Evie, she's in love, and Love, as everyone knows, is blind. If ever she begins to see, love will go ; that's how it will be with Evie. So let's pray for continual blindness.'

Not even when Claude Meredith had handed his bride into the railway compartment reserved for them, and they were speeding away to Harwich on their way to the Continent, did Meredith quite lose that feeling of nervous insecurity. Evelyn was sitting opposite to him—he liked to have her where he could see her fully. She looked, as he thought, as fresh as a rose, in her pretty pearl-grey coat and skirt, cream-coloured hat and vest, with real roses at her throat of his own choosing—a Maréchal Niel, a Bride and a Blush—and that same dream-like expression of content upon her face. But, even thus, he could not altogether convince himself of the reality of his possession.

'Evie, darling,' he said, presently, with an insane prompting to assure himself of the permanence of his happiness. She turned her face to him from the window, out of which she had been watching the wheeling dance of trees, and houses, and fields, without seeing anyone of them, and smiled dreamily.

'Well,' she said, 'well ? Do you think it's all *real*, Claude ? It seems so queer that you and I should be

sitting here, all by ourselves, going away into the world, just we two together, like people in a story-book ! It almost seems to me that we are living in a dream, too good to be true, and shall, presently, awaken to find ourselves just solitary snipes, sitting alone as before.'

He looked at her, with a tightness at his throat. Was she doubtful, also ? Was this feeling of unreality on both sides, a presentiment—or did all newly-married couples feel the same to begin with ? Her next words re-assured him.

'But there,' she said, leaning across to lay her grey-gloved hand upon his knee, 'I've touched you, sir, and find you very solid flesh and blood. You must take care, or you'll grow stout, Claude. You have it in you ; you're not the stuff that dreams are made of—men like you are not the sort to vanish in thin air.'

She laughed, the dreaminess clearing away from her face as mist before the sun. But Meredith's own countenance did not light. There was a grim determination in his eyes, in the set of his mouth, and in the grip of his hand upon his knee.

'Evelyn,' he said gravely, 'you say you love me with all your heart. Do you think that, under any circumstances, having once given me that precious gift, you could take it away again ?'

The golden eyes, like pools of peat-water with the sun upon them, looked up into his a little wonderingly. Then that whole-hearted smile of confidence flashed up into her face.

'What nonsense are you talking, dear ?' she said lightly. 'What possible circumstances could come between you and me, you foolish fellow ? You should know better than to ask, especially to-day.'

But Meredith was not yet satisfied, though, with such an answer and such a look, most bridegrooms might have

been much more than content. He was in that condition when a man cannot let well alone, but is driven to push his questions to an issue from which there is no possible escape but in the very plainest of replies.

‘But, supposing you were to find out that I was quite a different sort of chap to what you now suppose—that I had married you under false pretences, even,’—his voice had a dry, grating sound in it, and he stopped for a moment to moisten his lips—‘would you go on loving me in spite of all?’

The girl looked at him with a puzzled pucker of her broad white brow, and a widening of the eyes, which almost spoke of fear. What had come over Claude? she wondered. Was he a little off his head? But, no; it was only some stupid joke, to betray her into such assurances as lovers like to feed on. Well, he shouldn’t get what he wanted, if that was it; for Evelyn did not like to have admissions drawn from her against her will.

‘Would I go on loving you, if you proved to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, do you mean?’ she answered, hitting right from the shoulder, as Meredith had once called the downright manner she could assume on occasion. ‘No, indeed, I would not. If ever I caught you deceiving me, Claude, I could never care for you again. So mind what you are about.’

Why did her husband turn so pale? Evelyn wondered, as she said the words. She was sorry for them as soon as they were out of her mouth. For it was evident to see that he was too fond of her to bear even the suggestion of a change in her love for him. It was all a joke, of course. But it was he who had begun the foolish jesting, when all was said and done. She leaned forward and took his hand.

‘Come, you silly fellow,’ she said softly, and, into her face stole, once more, that look of perfect love and unutter-

able confidence. 'You mustn't take matters so seriously. You were fishing for compliments, you know ; and it's not my way to let them rise like fishes to your fly ; they must come of their own accord, or not at all.'

'Then you were not in earnest ?'

'Oh, yes, I was !'—the spirit of contradiction again seized upon the girl—'I meant exactly what I said. I could never love a man I didn't respect—not even you, sir. But then'—the spirit of contradiction went, and the beaming look returned, like sunshine after cloud—'I know you never could or would deceive me, Claude. I trust you as I do—myself, and that's saying a great deal ; for I know that, whatever else I am, I'm incapable of fraud. I can blow my own trumpet, you see, even on my wedding-day ! So don't talk such utter nonsense any more. Let's have done with fooling, and behave like sensible husband and wife.'

Meredith of course translated this quite literally ; he came over and sat beside his wife, put his arm round her, and sealed the compact with a kiss ; and they thus remained till the train began to slacken, when Evelyn jumped up hurriedly and took the seat which he had vacated.

'Now *do* behave sensibly, Claude,' she said, in as stern a voice as she could command. 'It's so horrid for two people to look newly-married—you know the sort of thing ? I should hate to be taken for a bride. I wish my gown didn't look quite so new—*does* it look very bridal ? That's just the worst of doing as we did, this morning. I declare I'm inclined to regret it already, aren't you, sir ? We must look such a pair of fools ; but don't let us look more foolish than we need.'

Truly she was a delicious mixture of child and woman, Meredith thought ; as guileless and trustful and playful as the one, as full of love and devotion as the other. But, if

she once found out what he had done, he knew, now, what would happen. He possessed her wholly, now, body, soul and spirit ; if she knew what he had paid for her possession, she would be his no more but in name. But that she must never know. Who was there to tell her but himself ? Meredith said to himself that there was no one, and that, therefore, he was safe.



CHAPTER XXIV

HIGH - WATER MARK

Past we glide, and past, and past !

R. BROWNING : *In a Gondola.*

CAN anyone ever tell, till afterwards, the exact moment when the highest water-mark is touched, as the waves follow each other up the sloping shore, and break, with happy laughter, among the shining pebbles and sea-weed upon the beach ? It would baffle the closest observer to say, or to point out the exact wave which is destined to mark high tide. And it is just the same with the tides of life—whether in happiness or in misery, there is a point where passion culminates : neither can reach any higher than the degree which has been reached ; afterwards comes either steady fulness or the ebb. To the happy there is sadness in this thought ; to the miserable there is relief. ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further’—that is the law of destiny ; we cannot make it otherwise. The worst of it is that we can never seize the moment when the flow is at the full and make the best of what it brings us. And so, as we stand in expectation of something better, the best is gone beyond recall. Not till then can we point out the shining line which marked the level, and say ‘That was the happiest day or moment of my life ; nothing that came afterwards was ever quite so perfect.’ Such an afternoon came to Claude and Evelyn Meredith, on the last day of their stay at Mürren, before they left that beautiful mountain eyrie to begin their journey homeward

It was one of those days of crystal clearness which seldom come except among the high Alps, when the atmosphere seems made of something like thin-cut diamond for the sun to shine through, and grow brighter for the passage. When the snowy mountain crests stand out against the blue with such vivid sharpness that every horn and point seems carved, as with a knife, from finest ivory and silver, and the shadows of the fir-trees, which clothe their feet, lie in inky blackness upon the bright green grass. How intense is every colour on such a day! The purple blueness of the shadows inside the woods can hardly be matched in any colour-box. The green and white of the mountain stream, leaping from the snows above to the green valleys beneath, can only be compared to *lapis lazuli* and pearl. And, as for the flowers—the gentian, the great moon-daisies, and little mountain pinks—only to be found in August on the higher slopes of the hills—not even McWhirter's vivid brush can do more than faintly represent for us their glowing tints.

Claude and Evelyn had climbed up high above the village, and were lolling at their ease, side by side, upon the moss, under an enormous rock which had fallen from the crest above them, and which served as the most comfortable sun-shade and back-rest for this couple of married lovers. For lovers they still were—aye, more so than ever. So absorbed was Evelyn in her husband that she had quite forgotten to care how her love might appear to outsiders. She had neither eyes nor ears for ordinary mortals at all, except as they affected Claude. The 'folly' of the newly-married state had so possessed her as almost to deprive her of the saving sense of humour, by reason of an over-balance of emotional bliss—the real reason why people in love look so ridiculous to those who are out of it. For to look at the world from the humorous point of view you must be able to get

out of your 'too solid' self, and stand as an unbiassed spectator ; and what man or woman who is over-head-and-ears in love can be so purely one of life's audience ? Even Claude, though by nature he had not half his wife's powers in this line, was less entranced than herself, at present. For, though his love for her was no less absorbing, it had in it far more of the sensual than of the spiritual ; and the knowledge of how he had gained her—though, since the wedding-day, this spectre had haunted him but little—forbade such complete lapping in perfect happiness as was the case with the innocent party to the compact.

He looked at Evelyn's face, turned full upon the mountain view, where the Jungfrau sat enthroned, without any apparent consciousness of what she was beholding ; for her golden eyes had an inward expression, as though they saw something above and beyond even the glories of snow mountains in sunshine. There was a smile upon her lips, and a restful purity about every line of her finely-modelled face, telling of the absence of pain or sorrow to an extent seldom seen but in the faces of the very young, which should have been wholly re-assuring to the most anxious of bridegrooms. But, like lovers in general, Claude wanted more than silent tokens of his power to make the beloved happy.

He laid his hand upon that one of hers which was nearest to him ; it was ungloved and most scandalously brown for the hand of a bride—for sunburn was one of those minor considerations which Evelyn had lately thrown overboard. It held a bunch of mountain pinks, with a tiny specimen of velvety edelweiss, which Claude had picked for her during their climb among the peaks above.

' Evie,' he said, 'are you happy ?'

She turned to him and answered at once, with that

unhesitating directness which does not allow the shadow of a doubt :

‘ Happy ? of course I am ; I never was so happy in my life. I feel like that little fountain on the terrace of the hotel—don’t laugh, now, for it’s quite true !—always leaping into the sunshine, with laughter in every drop. I wish this time could go on for ever and ever ; I wouldn’t have a moment changed.’

‘ Then you’ve *really* enjoyed our trip ? ’

‘ Now, Claude, you know I have ! We’ve seen so much—things I’ve been wanting to see all my life. But that isn’t the secret of my joy in them. Shall I tell you ? You’ll promise not to grow too fond of flattery ; though this, really, isn’t flattery at all, but sober earnest. It’s because every beautiful place we’ve been to, and every lovely thing we’ve seen, has been shared by you, you dear old boy. *You’ve* been the only real object ; they’ve been simply backgrounds to throw you into higher relief—that’s the simple truth, though I believe I’m more than foolish to tell you. I can’t be doing it *every* day, you know ; though, I suppose, love like ours will go on growing and growing as time goes on, and with it our happiness. But one doesn’t say these things after just the first, does one ? Old married couples are too sensible to need such outward signs of the inward grace. You must take it all for granted after to-day.’

‘ Must I ? I don’t see why. Of course, as you say, our happiness will go on growing. Though we begin to travel homewards after to-day, we’ll take our time over it, and there’ll be Hatherlea to look forward to in September. It should be all ready for us by then, and in very different trim to what it’s been for many a year. You’ll like being mistress there, dearest, won’t you ? You’ll make the most charming of *châtelaines*. It’ll take its proper part as a lead-

ing place in the county, under our rule. 'You'll be even happier there than here, won't you?' He looked at her with a man's pride of possession. But the girl's bright face clouded a little, and her answer did not quite satisfy him.

'I don't know,' she said slowly; 'I feel a little doubtful about Hatherlea—as though we were usurping the place of those who've been there so long. I almost dread that home-coming, Claude.'

He looked annoyed.

'Nonsense!' he said, a little sharply, 'that's a morbid notion. When people grow poor and have to sell their properties, it's no use being sentimental over the transaction. Clavering sells and Meredith buys. Meredith of Hatherlea will soon be on everyone's tongue, quite as a matter of course, and then the Claverings will sink into the limbo of the forgotten. Nothing like new blood, Evie.'

She frowned—the first frown he had seen upon her face for many a day—though it was such a very little one as hardly to ruffle the smooth white forehead more than a passing ripple disturbs a tranquil sheet of water.

'Ah, there speaks the Colonial, Claude!' she said. 'You can't look upon the matter from the same point of view as we who are home-bred. But, never mind; it's all right, I dare say, though I can't get over the feeling so easily. No, I won't spoil your pleasure in it—I wouldn't for worlds! Let us forget Hatherlea for the present and enjoy Mürren. There's no shadow of a regret upon this paradise of a place, any more than there's a stain upon the Jungfrau yonder. I wonder if Heaven, even, will be more perfect; though, I suppose, it's a bit shocking to say such a thing.'

Meredith made no reply; his notion of Heaven was of the vaguest and crudest, and he had not the slightest wish to make it any more definite. Earth was far more to his mind, just then, as it is to very many of us earth-worms,

though few of us are honest enough to confess it. To put matters to the test on the off-chance of gaining the one when, by so doing, we must most surely lose the other, requires a faith more lofty than that possessed by the majority. Even that heaven upon earth—the Kingdom of Love—began, just then, to feel a little less satisfying ; for mountain air is apt to increase the bodily appetites, and you cannot make your dinner on either sweet words or caresses. Meredith saw before his mind's eye that solid satisfaction of the tourist, British or otherwise, the *table d'hôte*, and it drew him hotelwards.

'Evie,' he said, getting up and picking the moss from his tweeds, 'it's six o'clock, do you know ?—High time we were moving.'

They were only just in time to tidy themselves before the dinner bell rang, and the seats were filling fast by the time they reached the dining-room. Two chairs, however, tipped up against the table on Meredith's right, were left unoccupied till nearly the end of the soup. He finished his last spoonful before he looked up to see who the new arrivals were, and that only on an exclamation of surprise which came out a-top of a fat snort at his elbow.

'By Jove !' said a voice with a familiar sound in it ; 'who would have thought to find *you* here, Meredith ? On the same errand as myself, eh ? Each with a lady in tow, it appears.'

Meredith's eyes encountered a coarse, red face, with a fuller sunburn upon it than any European sky can bestow. He seemed to have seen it before, but could not locate it, till the similarly familiar voice went on to say : 'You've not forgotten me, surely ? Though we were never very well acquainted, to be sure. Still, we've met, you know, and to meet an acquaintance, when abroad, is next door to meeting a friend. Jones of Kimberley, I am, and this is Mrs. Jones—'

he indicated the showy and much-bejewelled woman beside him. 'Nothing doing out there, as you know, so I've taken the opportunity to get married—like yourself, it seems? Mrs. Meredith—eh? Glad to make your acquaintance, madam. Nothing like using time for one thing when one can't make use of it for another. What?'

Meredith had not spoken; the meeting was displeasing to him, and he hardly knew what to say. He poured himself out a glass of wine to cover his embarrassment. But 'Jones of Kimberley' did not seem to notice the absence of response. He noisily sucked in a few spoonfuls of soup, then wiped a much bedewed beard with his napkin, and went on:

'Sad thing that about poor Calvert! Nice fellow, Calvert, though just a little aristocratic for our line of business, eh, Meredith? Great crony of yours, of course; thick as thieves you always were. We were all surprised he didn't cut up better—always thought it was he who was the lucky one; but it seems it was you, after all, though you kept it so dark—sly dog that you are!' He dug his elbow jocosely into Meredith's side. 'Maybe, though, things didn't come rightly out, and he, being the rich one, made his money over to the non-sleeping partner when he handed in his cheques, eh? A very close partnership, at any rate. Ha! ha! ha! Thrown dust in all our eyes, eh? All Kimberley's been mistaken. What?'

Meredith felt himself turn cold all over. But he drew himself up stiffly and faced the position as best he could.

'Kimberley, it seems, *was* mistaken,' he said coolly. 'But I don't see, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Jones, what Kimberley or any man in it has to do with the private affairs of myself and my late partner. We'll not discuss them here, if you please.'

'Eh, what? So that's your line! Beg your pardon,

though few of us are honest enough to confess it. To put matters to the test on the off-chance of gaining the one when, by so doing, we must most surely lose the other, requires a faith more lofty than that possessed by the majority. Even that heaven upon earth—the Kingdom of Love—began, just then, to feel a little less satisfying ; for mountain air is apt to increase the bodily appetites, and you cannot make your dinner on either sweet words or caresses. Meredith saw before his mind's eye that solid satisfaction of the tourist, British or otherwise, the *table d'hôte*, and it drew him hotelwards.

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'By Jove !' said a voice with a familiar sound in it ; 'who would have thought to find *you* here, Meredith ? On the same errand as myself, eh ? Each with a lady in tow, it appears.'

Meredith's eyes encountered a coarse, red face, with a fuller sunburn upon it than any European sky can bestow. He seemed to have seen it before, but could not locate it, till the similarly familiar voice went on to say : 'You've not forgotten me, surely ? Though we were never very well acquainted, to be sure. Still, we've met, you know, and to meet an acquaintance, when abroad, is next door to meeting a friend. Jones of Kimberley, I am, and this is Mrs. Jones—'

he indicated the showy and much-bejewelled woman beside him. 'Nothing doing out there, as you know, so I've taken the opportunity to get married—like yourself, it seems? Mrs. Meredith—eh? Glad to make your acquaintance, madam. Nothing like using time for one thing when one can't make use of it for another. What?'

Meredith had not spoken; the meeting was displeasing to him, and he hardly knew what to say. He poured himself out a glass of wine to cover his embarrassment. But 'Jones of Kimberley' did not seem to notice the absence of response. He noisily sucked in a few spoonfuls of soup, then wiped a much bedewed beard with his napkin, and went on:

'Sad thing that about poor Calvert! Nice fellow, Calvert, though just a little aristocratic for our line of business, eh, Meredith? Great crony of yours, of course; thick as thieves you always were. We were all surprised he didn't cut up better—always thought it was he who was the lucky one; but it seems it was you, after all, though you kept it so dark—sly dog that you are!' He dug his elbow jocosely into Meredith's side. 'Maybe, though, things didn't come rightly out, and he, being the rich one, made his money over to the non-sleeping partner when he handed in his cheques, eh? A very close partnership, at any rate. Ha! ha! ha! Thrown dust in all our eyes, eh? All Kimberley's been mistaken. What?'

Meredith felt himself turn cold all over. But he drew himself up stiffly and faced the position as best he could.

'Kimberley, it seems, *was* mistaken,' he said coolly. 'But I don't see, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Jones, what Kimberley or any man in it has to do with the private affairs of myself and my late partner. We'll not discuss them here, if you please.'

'Eh, what? So that's your line! Beg your pardon,

I'm sure, if there's any offence ; none was intended.' Then, to his wife, in a loud aside, Jones added huffily : 'D——d aristocrats, both of them ! What wine will you take, my dear ?'

Tingling all over, in spite of his assumed carelessness, Meredith turned towards Evelyn. As he feared, she had been listening to every word. There was a puzzled pucker upon her brow between the tawny edges of the wavy hair.

'I've quite finished ; let's go out on to the terrace and look at the sunset, Claude,' she said, with very evident desire to escape from the company of Mr. and Mrs. Jones of Kimberley.

Meredith got up with as evident alacrity, and threw the fleecy white wrap, which hung on the back of his wife's chair, about her shoulders.

Mr. Jones looked up.

'Bye-bye !' he said, munching a hard little mountain pear. 'See you again at breakfast, eh ?'

But Meredith only replied by a stiff bow. And he and Evelyn walked out of the room.

'What awful people !' she cried, when they were out upon the terrace, from which was to be seen the nightly pageant of the dying of the sun, in crimson glory upon a bed of fiery snow, a sight which everyone seemed only able to bear when fortified by a good dinner. 'Do you really know them, Claude ? If such were your associates, you must be glad to turn your back on Kimberley !'

'Yes, one has to put up with queer people out there, Evie. Not that I knew them, really—only met him occasionally in business. Let's breakfast early to-morrow morning, and get away before they're down.'

'Certainly ; I don't want to know them better, I'm
— One meeting's enough to sample them. By-the-by,

who was this Calvert he talked about—I thought Frank Clavering was your partner ?’

Meredith stopped suddenly, and fumbled in his pocket for a match to light his cigar. He kept strict silence as he struck it on the sole of his boot, applied it to his cigar, and blew it into redness. Was it the red cigar, or the crimson of the sunset sky, that made his face look so high-coloured ? Evelyn wondered, as she watched him. When at last he spoke, it was snappishly, between the puffs of his cigar. ‘Don’t you see the fellow knows nothing at all about my affairs ? I wonder you take any notice of his talk, Evelyn,’ he said. ‘He’s one of those chaps who like to pretend to a knowledge which they don’t possess.’

‘I suppose he said “Calvert” in mistake for “Clavering” ?’ persisted the young wife, a little unwisely.

Meredith took his unsmoked cigar from between his lips and hurled it impatiently over the steep side of the mountain into the gulf of blue shadow which, by day, was the sunny valley of Lauterbrunnen. ‘It’s as bitter as gall !’ he said sharply, meaning, apparently, the cigar. ‘As for that fellow Jones, I wish you’d let him alone, Eve. How should I know what he means ? I doubt if he does himself.’

He lit another cigar, and they paced up and down in silence, while the fire went out from the snows, leaving them cold and livid. Evelyn looked at the Jungfrau, a moment ago all one blush at the last kiss of the departing sun, and shivered, notwithstanding her fleecy wrap. To her the great mountain looked like a corpse upon a bier, wrapped round by the mourning drapery of the falling shadows. The sight filled her suddenly with an infinite sadness.

CHAPTER XXV

NEW AND OLD

There's a new foot on the floor, my friend,
And a new face at the door, my friend,
A new face at the door.

TENNYSON : *The Death of the Old Year.*

'PON my word, they really *did* seem pleased to see us, didn't they, Eve? We can't find any fault with our welcome home, eh?'

Claude Meredith and his wife were standing before the blazing fire of logs, which had been lighted in the cavernous chimney of the old entrance hall at Hatherlea. They had just arrived from abroad, and were still in their travelling clothes. The evening was fresh, not to say cool, and Meredith was rubbing his hands at the blaze. He looked flushed and pleased at the little triumphal entry which they had been treated to on their arrival—the arches or evergreens over the gates, the people who lined the road, and the shouts of the children and some of the men. He looked at his wife for sympathy; but she did not answer at once. She was leaning with one hand upon the stone of the chimney-piece, and the face which looked into the fire was decidedly grave. Nor did she raise it at the appeal of her husband.

'Well, why don't you answer?' he asked, presently, just a trifle impatiently, as she continued unresponsive. 'Wasn't our reception all that could be desired?'

'Just what might have been expected, I think,' she

said at last, seeing that Claude would have his answer. But neither words nor tone were enthusiastic ; for Evelyn knew the people, as her husband did not ; and could put a juster valuation on their manner of greeting the new owners of the estate than he was able to do. She had detected the want of genuine ring in the shouts—not very many of them, for the children did most of the hurrahing—which came from the grown-up people ; she had noticed the expression of the stolid, rough-hewn faces which lined the way. And, as for the triumphal arches, well, probably, the tenants and servants on the estate had put them up, knowing what is usual on such occasions.

‘You think they regret the Claverings, and only give us a welcome out of policy ?’ Claude asked, in a tone of pique, and his face fell at the notion.

‘Well, as to regretting them, I don’t quite know,’ was Evelyn’s answer. ‘Things have been so quiet at the Hall, and means so straitened, this long while, that the people have grown a little dissatisfied, and have rather lost their old feudal feeling towards “the family.” They know on which side their bread is buttered. They’re too canny, hereabouts, to refuse to adapt themselves to the new, especially as the new means money and employment, when the old prosperity has passed away. That’s, probably, why they accept us as they do. But, all the same, supposing Gilbert Clavering were to come back rich, and could enjoy his own again, Hatherlea Bridge would infinitely prefer it. The place is conservative and clannish to the backbone, and doesn’t take kindly to interlopers. They’d shout themselves hoarse for *him*. You’d soon tell the difference.’

‘Well, I think you are too critical, Eve.’ Meredith unbuttoned his overcoat, and threw it aside as he spoke. ‘One must take things as one finds them. As for our being interlopers, or Gilbert Clavering coming back to

It was one of those days of crystal clearness which seldom come except among the high Alps, when the atmosphere seems made of something like thin-cut diamond for the sun to shine through, and grow brighter for the passage. When the snowy mountain crests stand out against the blue with such vivid sharpness that every horn and point seems carved, as with a knife, from finest ivory and silver, and the shadows of the fir-trees, which clothe their feet, lie in inky blackness upon the bright green grass. How intense is every colour on such a day! The purple blueness of the shadows inside the woods can hardly be matched in any colour-box. The green and white of the mountain stream, leaping from the snows above to the green valleys beneath, can only be compared to *lapis lazuli* and pearl. And, as for the flowers—the gentian, the great moon-daisies, and little mountain pinks—only to be found in August on the higher slopes of the hills—not even McWhirter's vivid brush can do more than faintly represent for us their glowing tints.

Claude and Evelyn had climbed up high above the village, and were lolling at their ease, side by side, upon the moss, under an enormous rock which had fallen from the crest above them, and which served as the most comfortable sun-shade and back-rest for this couple of married lovers. For lovers they still were—aye, more so than ever. So absorbed was Evelyn in her husband that she had quite forgotten to care how her love might appear to outsiders. She had neither eyes nor ears for ordinary mortals at all, except as they affected Claude. The 'folly' of the newly-married state had so possessed her as almost to deprive her of the saving sense of humour, by reason of an over-balance of emotional bliss—the real reason why people in love look so ridiculous to those who are out of it. For to look at the world from the humorous point of view you must be able to get

out of your 'too solid' self, and stand as an unbiassed spectator ; and what man or woman who is over-head-and-ears in love can be so purely one of life's audience ? Even Claude, though by nature he had not half his wife's powers in this line, was less entranced than herself, at present. For, though his love for her was no less absorbing, it had in it far more of the sensual than of the spiritual ; and the knowledge of how he had gained her—though, since the wedding-day, this spectre had haunted him but little—forbade such complete lapping in perfect happiness as was the case with the innocent party to the compact.

He looked at Evelyn's face, turned full upon the mountain view, where the Jungfrau sat enthroned, without any apparent consciousness of what she was beholding ; for her golden eyes had an inward expression, as though they saw something above and beyond even the glories of snow mountains in sunshine. There was a smile upon her lips, and a restful purity about every line of her finely-modelled face, telling of the absence of pain or sorrow to an extent seldom seen but in the faces of the very young, which should have been wholly re-assuring to the most anxious of bridegrooms. But, like lovers in general, Claude wanted more than silent tokens of his power to make the beloved happy.

He laid his hand upon that one of hers which was nearest to him ; it was ungloved and most scandalously brown for the hand of a bride—for sunburn was one of those minor considerations which Evelyn had lately thrown overboard. It held a bunch of mountain pinks, with a tiny specimen of velvety edelweiss, which Claude had picked for her during their climb among the peaks above.

'Evie,' he said, 'are you happy ?'

She turned to him and answered at once, with that

unhesitating directness which does not allow the shadow of a doubt :

‘ Happy ? of course I am ; I never was so happy in my life. I feel like that little fountain on the terrace of the hotel—don’t laugh, now, for it’s quite true !—always leaping into the sunshine, with laughter in every drop. I wish this time could go on for ever and ever ; I wouldn’t have a moment changed.’

‘ Then you’ve *really* enjoyed our trip ? ’

‘ Now, Claude, you know I have ! We’ve seen so much—things I’ve been wanting to see all my life. But that isn’t the secret of my joy in them. Shall I tell you ? You’ll promise not to grow too fond of flattery ; though this, really, isn’t flattery at all, but sober earnest. It’s because every beautiful place we’ve been to, and every lovely thing we’ve seen, has been shared by you, you dear old boy. *You’ve* been the only real object ; they’ve been simply backgrounds to throw you into higher relief—that’s the simple truth, though I believe I’m more than foolish to tell you. I can’t be doing it *every* day, you know ; though, I suppose, love like ours will go on growing and growing as time goes on, and with it our happiness. But one doesn’t say these things after just the first, does one ? Old married couples are too sensible to need such outward signs of the inward grace. You must take it all for granted after to-day.’

‘ Must I ? I don’t see why. Of course, as you say, our happiness will go on growing. Though we begin to travel homewards after to-day, we’ll take our time over it, and there’ll be Hatherlea to look forward to in September. It should be all ready for us by then, and in very different trim to what it’s been for many a year. You’ll like being mistress there, dearest, won’t you ? You’ll make the most charming of *châtelaines*. It’ll take its proper part as a lead-

ing place in the county, under our rule. 'You'll be even happier there than here, won't you?' He looked at her with a man's pride of possession. But the girl's bright face clouded a little, and her answer did not quite satisfy him.

'I don't know,' she said slowly; 'I feel a little doubtful about Hatherlea—as though we were usurping the place of those who've been there so long. I almost dread that home-coming, Claude.'

He looked annoyed.

'Nonsense!' he said, a little sharply, 'that's a morbid notion. When people grow poor and have to sell their properties, it's no use being sentimental over the transaction. Clavering sells and Meredith buys. Meredith of Hatherlea will soon be on everyone's tongue, quite as a matter of course, and then the Claverings will sink into the limbo of the forgotten. Nothing like new blood, Evie.'

She frowned—the first frown he had seen upon her face for many a day—though it was such a very little one as hardly to ruffle the smooth white forehead more than a passing ripple disturbs a tranquil sheet of water.

'Ah, there speaks the Colonial, Claude!' she said. 'You can't look upon the matter from the same point of view as we who are home-bred. But, never mind; it's all right, I dare say, though I can't get over the feeling so easily. No, I won't spoil your pleasure in it—I wouldn't for worlds! Let us forget Hatherlea for the present and enjoy Mürren. There's no shadow of a regret upon this paradise of a place, any more than there's a stain upon the Jungfrau yonder. I wonder if Heaven, even, will be more perfect; though, I suppose, it's a bit shocking to say such a thing.'

Meredith made no reply; his notion of Heaven was of the vaguest and crudest, and he had not the slightest wish to make it any more definite. Earth was far more to his mind, just then, as it is to very many of us earth-worms,

though few of us are honest enough to confess it. To put matters to the test on the off-chance of gaining the one when, by so doing, we must most surely lose the other, requires a faith more lofty than that possessed by the majority. Even that heaven upon earth—the Kingdom of Love—began, just then, to feel a little less satisfying ; for mountain air is apt to increase the bodily appetites, and you cannot make your dinner on either sweet words or caresses. Meredith saw before his mind's eye that solid satisfaction of the tourist, British or otherwise, the *table d'hôte*, and it drew him hotelwards.

'Evie,' he said, getting up and picking the moss from his tweeds, 'it's six o'clock, do you know ? — High time we were moving.'

They were only just in time to tidy themselves before the dinner bell rang, and the seats were filling fast by the time they reached the dining-room. Two chairs, however, tipped up against the table on Meredith's right, were left unoccupied till nearly the end of the soup. He finished his last spoonful before he looked up to see who the new arrivals were, and that only on an exclamation of surprise which came out a-top of a fat snort at his elbow.

'By Jove !' said a voice with a familiar sound in it ; 'who would have thought to find *you* here, Meredith ? On the same errand as myself, eh ? Each with a lady in tow, it appears.'

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'Eh, what? So that's your line! Beg your pardon,

and are here for good. I intend to stand for the district at the next election ; so we must, I suppose, have everyone. What do you say to a garden-party, with the house thrown open as well ? It will cost something to do properly ; but I shouldn't grudge the money.'

Evelyn gasped. She and her husband were sitting at dinner, and she was eating a cutlet, with appetite, after returning from a long drive across the moors. But she suddenly felt that she had had enough. She put down her knife and fork.

'What do I think of it ?' she said breathlessly. 'Well, I can only say you would be committing the most fatal of social mistakes if you did such a thing. It would set everyone against you. Fancy Lady Bellister's feelings if you asked her to meet Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, the retired general dealers from Hexham ! And these good people would be equally offended if you lumped them in with the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker, who have not yet withdrawn from turning an honest penny. I wish you would be a little less large in your ideas. But, then, you people from the Colonies can't be expected to share our narrow English prejudices, so I mustn't be too hard on you, I suppose.'

Evelyn spoke with unusual irritation, thinking no servant was in the room to overhear either her husband's proposal or her reply. But, as she finished, she became uncomfortably aware that old Thomas had come to a dead stand, when half across the room, with a dish in his hand. He had forgotten himself so far as to listen. She looked towards him with a frown, and he caught himself up and suddenly became again the blind and deaf butler who neither sees nor hears what is not intended for him.

But this well-trained repression of the senses had been interrupted for once ; and Thomas had received an impression which no after closing of the doors could remove.

'Jobson,' he said to the old gardener, like himself a survival of the former *régime*, in a moment of confidence : ' Ah telt ye how't wad be. We hev Scriptor for 't that if new wine be put intor auld bottles, t' bottles 'll bust and t' wine be spilt. And yon's joost hoo 'tis.'

'Ay, Thamas,' was the answer, 'ye're reet, man. A body meit as sune luik tor gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles, as to see folk wha coom, naebody kens from what stock, show the fruits o' t' quality. Claverings were as bare o' brass as a Jersey lily is o' leaves ; and they hed their fau'ts, an' vara serious yans tae. But they hed t' root o' t' mattor in them, for arl that. It's a plain case of "t' auld is better."'

'Ay, we've couped * genuine auld siller to get new brass,' replied the butler, shaking his head sadly ; 't' cup may be bravely gilt, but gilding nivvor stands ; it rubs off in daily use, and then it's plain to see what's underneath. Give me the siller, be it nivvor sae auld and battered. There's guid metal to the vara end. But *wot* opinion makes nae matter, Jobson ; folks disn't ax us for 't, and we maun keep it tae worsel's. If ye want to ken what Ah think, hooiver, Ah tell ye this winna last. There's ower mickle flash aboot it.'

* Exchanged.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN ALL HIS GLORY

I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
 Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.
 I said, 'O soul, make ready and carouse,
 Dear soul, for all is well.'

To which my soul made answer readily :
 'Trust me, in bliss I shall abide
 In this great mansion that is built for me,
 So royal-rich and wide.'

TENNYSON : *The Palace of Art.*

A SIMILAR opinion to that of old Thomas and his colleague of the garden was expressed by others, and far less guardedly. For, spite of Evelyn's dissuasion, Meredith's garden-party became an accomplished fact. Not as he had planned it, however; for Claude was wise enough to bow to his wife's superior knowledge of society, and he was willing enough for her to make such alterations in his design as to secure what was, at any rate outwardly, a brilliant execution.

The Hatherlea Hall garden-party came off duly, on a scale which surpassed even Meredith's anticipation. For, as he still insisted on having 'all the country-side,' it extended to three days instead of one, everybody being asked in succession according to class. It was quite the event of the season, was talked of for at least a week afterwards, and came in for extensive mention in every one of the local papers, the dictionary having been ransacked by

the reporters for words long enough and fine enough to paint its splendours and the wealth and generosity of the giver.

The weather, too, was propitious, the little summer, which comes between autumn and winter having set in with unusual brilliance to make the gardens pleasant on all three afternoons of the *al fresco fête*. The trees were still gorgeous with unshed foliage of gold and green and crimson ; the shaven lawns were both green and dry ; dahlias, asters and chrysanthemums blazed in the beds, reflecting such credit on old Jobson as to modify his opinion of his master's position, and make him say to his crony, Thomas, ' After arl's said and done there's a deal o' power in brass, and a good bit o' satisfaction to be got oot o' the spendin' on 't.'

The owner of Hatherlea was in his glory, walking about his grounds, seeing that the white marquees were properly pitched, with an eye to the way of the wind—only the gentlest of breezes it was, just enough to flutter the flags upon their central poles—and that the tables were duly laid. Then, when the hour came for receiving the county magnates, who more proud than he as he stood with his handsome wife, in her well-fitting gown of green and gold, with the old time-tinted lace, which matched so well with the richness of autumn, to welcome his guests. They came in full muster. Nobody had refused the invitation, for everybody was curious to see what Hatherlea Hall was like in gala trim, and how its new owner would bear himself in the trying *rôle* of country gentleman. Besides, though the host might be a nobody, and, as such, might have been ignored by the more select of the neighbourhood, no one could deny that the hostess was all that could be desired ; and to have refused an invitation issued in their joint names would have been quite an unnecessary piece of self-denial, under the circumstances.

Lady Bellister and her daughters, Sir Lionel Bertram and his newly-married wife (who, by-the-by, was a duke's daughter), even the Earl and Countess themselves had put in an appearance. And everybody wore their finest feathers, and smiled their brightest as they shook hands with the 'new people,' who 'must be received, don't you know, because there is no reason why they shouldn't, and they are so quite delightfully rich.'

Meredith counted them all, and his ears drank in the names and titles as given out pompously by old Thomas, who, like his friend the gardener, was forced to take a grim pleasure in the glory thus reflected on Hatherlea Hall.

Thus, when the last had been presented and all these gay guests were strolling about the grounds, looking like a series of brilliant groups by Watteau against the dim grey background of the lovely old Elizabethan house, Claude Meredith turned to his wife with a smile of supreme content: 'It'll be a success, Eve,' he said, in a voice which was deep with satisfaction; 'in fact, it's a success already. And'—he touched her arm with a gesture of loving pride, that went to her heart in spite of minor annoyances which only she could feel—'it's *you* who have made it so. There isn't a woman here, not even the Countess herself, to compare with my wife. Now, let us see if all's going right about the tea.'

Evelyn smiled and nodded, and though she privately thought that Mrs. Leaming, the housekeeper, was quite capable of carrying out the final arrangements with respect to the refreshments, important though these undoubtedly are to the success of every social gathering, she went obediently to give them the blessing of her hostess' eye. For did not Claude wish it? and were not his wishes her dearest concern, even when she thought them a little unnecessary? 'Dear old man!' she said to herself, 'he's

just a trifle fidgetty, and cumbered, like Martha, about much serving ; but that doesn't hinder his being all the world to me. Such little vexatious trifles are like the shadows of the leaves, they can't shut out the sunshine of love.'

And Evelyn was quite sincere. Whatever the differences between her and her husband on the score of taste in social matters, their hearts were as united as ever. For taste is superficial, but love has its roots in deeper soil ; and it takes something much stronger than mere difference of opinion to uproot it, at least from such a nature as that of Evelyn Meredith.

Lady Bellister and her 'honourable' but plain and uninteresting pair of daughters had lost no time in turning their attention to tea, as nothing else more important claimed it. Her ladyship, being afraid of possible damp so late in the season, had avoided the tent and sought the shelter of the morning-room, where old Thomas had served this very select party with a tea-tray all to themselves.

'Really, everything's very well done,' said mother to daughters, as she lay back in Evelyn's particular chair, and sipped her tea luxuriously, while 'the girls' made a pilgrimage of inspection round the room. 'But, of course, it's all Mrs. Meredith's doing, or, rather, I should say, Lady Margaret Hesketh's. He knew what he was about, that man from the Colonies, when he married so as to secure a stepmother who is one of us ; it'll be of untold advantage to him. And Evelyn Hesketh is very well connected, on her mother's side, as well. But, though I believe she hadn't a penny, and this Meredith is rolling in riches, I rather wonder that she could stoop to accept him. I shouldn't like to see you marrying so much beneath you, my dears.'

'Have you everything that you want, Lady Bellister ?' asked a voice outside the open French window ; and the lady nearly let her tea-cup drop, as she turned to see 'that

man from the Colonies' darkening the sunlight with his broad shadow.

Was it possible that he had overheard what she had said? Even Lady Bellister's composure, not so easily disturbed, was shaken by the bare idea. But she kept her tremors valiantly to herself, and answered with aristocratic *sang-froid* :

'Oh, yes, thank you, everything! I was just saying that you and dear Mrs. Meredith have planned your party most perfectly; nothing has been forgotten. So unlike the vulgar display, with no comfort under it, which *some* people think is the proper thing. I never go to gatherings of that kind, I assure you, Mr. Meredith.'

The tone was decidedly patronising; but Meredith, though, truth to tell, he had overheard a sentence or two which had made him slightly uncomfortable, was ready to take the lady's word for it that her comments concerning 'some people' had been general and not particular. Had she not told him that, on this occasion, all had gone off 'perfectly,' and that to gatherings such as those alluded to she 'never went'? Claude, accordingly, went away, feeling flattered instead of affronted; which, of course, showed him to be a person of no great perception.

'I'm well out of *that* scrape at any rate,' said Lady Bellister, in a more cautious tone, when her host was out of ear-shot. 'These sort of people are, usually, so quick to take offence. But the man seems to be a fool as well as an outsider; which is all the better for us. The wonder is that he was so very successful in business, if he's so easily gulled. But a man, I suppose, may be shrewd in some things and a fool in others; and one has to make allowances for his ignorance in accepting as true metal what everyone knows are the merest of society counters. I wonder what he expects to get in return for all this costly display? Of course he wouldn't do it for nothing. Now, girls, if you're

quite ready, we'll go and say good-bye to Mrs. Meredith. We dine out, this evening, you must remember, and we've given time enough to the Hatherlea show. No more tea, either of you? Well, come out into the grounds. I told Williams to bring the carriage round at half-past four.'

'Yes, Claude, it really *has* gone off successfully. After all, your idea was better than I thought for. I'm so glad you're satisfied with the result of your labours.'

Evelyn said this to her husband, with perfect sincerity, as she slipped her hand through Claude's arm and went into the house with him, after the last guest of the three days' entertainment had disappeared down the avenue. A sigh of relief accompanied Mrs. Meredith's remark; but it was none the less hearty for that.

'Yes, I felt sure we were doing the right thing,' was Claude Meredith's complacent rejoinder, as he patted the hand which lay on his arm. 'Everybody has enjoyed it immensely, and these things make people popular. You see, my dear, I was not so far out, after all, though you *were* a little down on me at first; eh, madam Eve?'

'Yes; Adam always *has* been right ever since the beginning, hasn't he?' was young Mrs. Meredith's answer. She spoke playfully, but she could not help the sarcasm. It was lost on her husband however.

'I don't know what you mean, dear,' he said doubtfully; 'so far as I can see, the thing is obvious.'

'That's just it, Claude. It always *does* seem to me that Adam and all his sons save themselves no end of difficulty by keeping to the plain view and only seeing what they want. It's Eve and her daughters who plague themselves and get their fingers burnt by poking below the surface. Women know a deal too much for their peace of mind. But I'm quite ready to allow that, taken

as a whole, your house-warming has been a huge success. Will that satisfy you, you dear old Adam ?'

It did ; and Adam showed his appreciation of Eve's generosity in the usual way, which, also, gave unqualified satisfaction ; for Adam and Eve will be the same to the end of time.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SCRAP OF PAPER

Something floats up suddenly——

E. B. BROWNING : *Aurora Leigh*.

‘It came to pass that, one day at eventide, when winter was drawing nigh, the Lord of Hatherlea stood before the hearth in his castle hall, looking moodily into the fire.’

Evelyn Meredith, as she said these playful words, came behind her husband and put her gloved hands upon his two shoulders. She had just come in from tea at the Rectory, wrapped in her pretty brown furs, with the glow of the nipping air in her cheeks and eyes. For November had already laid a wintry hand upon the North Countrie, and there was a powdering of snow upon trees and ground.

The old hall was warm with fireshine, and flickering with the play of the flames which curled and leaped round the logs and roared up the wide chimney ; of other light there was none as yet. Had Claude’s mind been at leisure and his temper unruffled, his wife’s pretty manner of taking him at unawares would have provoked no worse than a kiss. But he had been to Newcastle on a matter of business which had proved unpleasant, and had come back in an irritable frame of mind. Moreover, the sudden pressure of her hands and the sound of her voice—for she had stepped so lightly over the floor as to come upon him wholly unperceived, had given him such a start that he had dropped an open pocket-book, which he had been examining, upon the fender, scattering some of its contents.

‘I wish you wouldn’t steal upon one in that d——d quiet way, Evelyn!’ he exclaimed, with such an oath as he had never before used in her presence. ‘It’s so childish to play at surprises. Besides, see what you’ve made me do! It’s only by the merest chance these papers have escaped the fire.’

‘I’m very sorry, Claude; I’d no idea you were so nervous. But, never mind, I’ll pick them up for you.’

Evelyn spoke with a touch of offence blended with an equal modicum of contempt—the oath and the reprimand alike annoyed her. She was quite unconscious of having done anything to call forth such an ebullition of temper; but she went down on her knees as she spoke, and began to gather up the papers.

This attempt to mend one offence seemed, however, to make another in the uneasy mind of her lord and master.

‘Just let the things alone,’ he said hastily, putting her aside as he did so, and himself stooping to recover his fallen property. ‘I don’t like to see you grovelling on the floor like that; you’ll only soil your gown. I can pick up the papers for myself, thank you.’

Evelyn rose to her feet. ‘Oh, very well,’ she said, with a feeling as of tears at her throat; ‘just as you like.’ Then, after watching him for a moment, vexation conquered the smart, and she said, half contemptuously, as she turned to go upstairs: ‘There isn’t much harm done, is there? You needn’t have upset yourself as well as the papers.’

But, spite of her careless words, Evelyn herself felt more than a little upset, as she changed her gown, and came down again for a read over the hall fire, which she often indulged in before the dinner-gong rang. She had hoped to find Claude still there, and ready to make up to her for his unusual fit of temper. But the hall was empty, except

for little Warlock, who was amusing himself by trying to get at a bit of folded paper that had fallen inside the fender. When he saw his mistress he looked up in her face with a pair of bright appealing eyes, then back at the paper, with a dumb request that her fingers would do for him what neither paws nor nose could effect.

‘Well, Warlock,’ she said, ‘what do you want with that paper? It’s no concern of yours, my man; let’s see what it is.’

She moved the fire-irons as she spoke, and extricated the half-sheet of rather dirty paper, a good deal frayed, which Warlock so earnestly desired. He sat up and begged for its possession; but his mistress took no notice. Her eye was caught by some words, written on the paper in discoloured ink—— ‘*to be used at your discretion for the benefit of my son, Bertram Clavering, of Hatherlea Hall, near Hexham, Northumberland.*’

What was this?—it looked like the memorandum for a will—could it have fallen out of Claude’s pocket-book? If so, could it have had anything to do with his guardianship of little Bertie? It would seem so; the name was plain enough, also that of the house—Claude’s house now. Evelyn felt as one who sees a threatening vision, or dreams an evil dream; and, as in a dream, she looked again mechanically at the paper she held in her hand, while little Warlock continued to sit up and beg, with small noises of request, the flames casting his quaint little shadow upon the floor. ‘*I, Frank Clavering, alias Calvert, leave the whole of my property, real and personal, which I have acquired at Kimberley and Cape Town, South Africa, to you, Claude Meredith, my friend and partner——*’ The words swam before Evelyn’s eyes; a sudden darkness came between her and the paper. She clutched at the stone mantel-piece to keep herself from falling. What could it all mean? Claude

had said that what his partner had left was hardly worth naming. But this did not look like it. 'The whole of my property, real and personal'; people do not usually speak of their possessions in this manner when they have next to nothing. Could Claude have been mistaken? Was this paper unauthentic? Or——' Claude Meredith's wife dared not go beyond that 'or.' She turned faint and trembled at what lay unexpressed.

Old Thomas came in with the lamp, and apologies for his lateness, which his mistress did not so much as hear. She stood, half-stunned, before the fire, with her eyes fixed on the flames and the paper still in her hand. The terrier, finding his request disregarded, gave it up as hopeless, and lay down, with a dog's long sigh of mingled resignation and content, upon the rug at her feet.

The butler went out, with an inquiring glance at his mistress, closing the door more noisily than usual. Then, also with unusual clangour, he sounded the first gong.

The brazen din roused Evelyn. She looked at the bottom of the paper for a signature—there was none; the omission relieved her. After all it was not a proper will. Perhaps it was only a note of his intentions, scribbled by Frank Clavering in an idle hour. Anyhow, without a signature it could have no legal force—probably, it meant nothing after all.

Her blood began to flow again; the darkness cleared from before her eyes. She would ask Claude about it, after dinner, and get him to explain. Of course he would be able to clear everything up. She had frightened herself for nothing.

Evelyn chid herself for her suspicions; she was ashamed of them already. Nevertheless, hearing her husband's step upon the stairs, she turned hot and cold by turns, and thrust

the paper hastily into her pocket. When Claude, who had cooled down during his toilet operations, joined her on the hearthrug, she was as crimson as the reddest rose. What would he say when he knew that she had read one of his private papers? She had done it involuntarily, certainly; but would he understand? Should she tell him? or should she simply give back the paper without a word? The questions buzzed in Evelyn's brain, causing her to stand silent and disregardless of her husband.

Meredith, also, was embarrassed, though from a totally different cause. He stood, rubbing his hands uneasily at the blaze, quite aware of his wife's aloofness, yet setting it down to his own ill-temper, which he had let out upon her earlier in the evening. Being a man who liked to be in everyone's good graces, it made him seriously uncomfortable to feel that anybody was displeased with him, especially his wife, with whom, till now, he had hardly so much as exchanged an unkind word. Even the unpleasant business, which had caused his annoyance in the first instance, receded before this new discomfort. It was decidedly a nuisance to have to apologise. But, if that were the only way to straightening matters, Meredith supposed he would have to do it. He felt ill-used, however, and the feeling gave a lameness to his attempt.

'Come, Evelyn,' he said awkwardly, 'don't sulk; I didn't mean to offend you.'

His wife started and looked at him in a bewildered sort of way. 'I'm not sulking, Claude,' she said, her voice sounding a little wiry by reason of the disturbance of her mind. 'It's not me you've offended, is it? If——' She stopped, only now understanding that they were talking at cross-purposes. 'I mean, your crossness with me doesn't matter,' she went on quickly, wondering whether she had not better get the explanation over before the

second gong should sound. 'What's troubling me is something quite different. I wonder——' Her hand was in her pocket searching for the paper, when the summons to dinner suddenly pealed through the hall.

'Well, dear, *that's* all right,' said Claude, his countenance lifting, as he drew his wife's hand through his arm. 'If you've forgiven me, that's all I want ; whatever else is bothering your uneasy head can wait till we've had something to eat.'

Evelyn sighed and resigned herself. There was nothing else to be done. But the dinner was not a success, so far as she was concerned. She said little and ate less ; for, all the time, she was wondering whether she should tell her husband everything, or merely return the paper to him and let him suppose that she knew nothing. Evelyn Meredith, however, was not of a nature to conceal, still less to deceive. Honesty and openness were part of her being, and it rebelled against any action which was contrary to these. Besides, if she kept the matter to herself, how should she get at the explanation, without which, though her momentary distrust of her husband's uprightness was already disallowed, she felt that the incident could not wholly be laid aside.

'Well, what's it all about, darling ? You're not angry with me still ?' asked Meredith, as he and his wife left the dining-room and returned to the hall, where they often spent the evening.

Evelyn looked up in his face with a charming smile. 'No,' she said frankly ; 'oh, no, I'm not angry, Claude. It *is* tiresome to have one's things upset, and a little momentary flare on your part was natural enough. But '—she put her hand into her pocket and drew out the paper—'this is what I've found. It must have fallen from the pocket-book with the other papers, and been over-

looked when you picked up the rest. I'd better say at once that I've read it ; I did so without thinking, and now I don't know *what* to think ! I wish you'd explain it to me, dear.'

At the sight of the paper in his wife's hand a flash as of fire seemed to pass before Claude Meredith's eyes. It was all he could do to control himself, and only the imminent need of keeping his head steady hindered him from betraying himself at once.

He took the paper with a hand that shook a little, notwithstanding the restraint which he was putting upon himself ; and, for a moment, looked at it in silence. A moment, at least, he felt he must have to consider how to act. Then he glanced at his wife. Her eyes were upon his face—those frank, unclouded eyes which had always met his so unflinchingly. Claude's own fell before them ; but he answered, with apparent candour :

'What is it you want me to explain, dearest ? I don't see what there is to trouble you in this little memorandum.'

'I thought Mr. Frank Clavering left no money behind him worth mentioning, Claude.'

'No more he did. At one time he thought he'd have a fair amount to leave ; but he had—well, considerable losses. And, at his death, there was next to nothing in the bank.'

Meredith said the words boldly enough, but his eyes shifted uneasily about, avoiding those of his wife.

'Then he made this will—— ?'

'It's *not* a will, my dearest ; see, there's no signature. It's merely a little memorandum the poor fellow left among his papers, made apparently before his losses. He'd have executed a legal document, probably, if he'd not been so unfortunate.'

'Why does he call himself "Calvert" ? That's the

name those people at Mürren used, isn't it? And you said they were making a mistake.'

'Deuce take it! She remembers that, does she?' thought Meredith, with a rush of hot blood to the head. 'How am I to make it all clear to her? That's the worst of marrying a woman who has studied logic. Why does he call himself Calvert?' he added aloud, after a moment's hesitation; 'well, Evelyn, he had his reasons, I suppose. You know, my poor friend had to leave England rather hastily, and there are circumstances under which a man thinks it better to have an *alias*.'

'Then Calvert and Clavering are the same?'

Meredith hesitated a moment, frowned, and then nodded.

'I thought you said——'

Meredith ground his teeth.

'Really, Evelyn!' he said impatiently; 'I wish you wouldn't harp upon that. You were mistaken, that's all. You are making a mountain out of a molehill. The whole business is founded on a mistake. Poor Frank Cal—— Clavering, I mean, asked me to be guardian to his son. Most of the money was my own; though, at one time, he had an equal share. But I was provident and lucky, and he was not. When it came to looking into his affairs there was precious little to leave, and what there was has gone to his son and to his widow. There's the case in a nutshell. Can't you take my word for it that all's right and above-board?'

Evelyn Meredith's eyes were still on her husband's face. But, as he glanced up at them for a moment, he saw that the frank confidence he was wont to meet in their clear depths was there no longer. There was a troubled appearance in them which turned their gold to brown, as the shadow of a cloud changes the colour of a mountain stream; the smooth white forehead had a pucker in it;

the mouth had lost its easy curve. For Evelyn, with all her transparent candour and childlike confidence, was no fool. Her ear was too sensitive not to distinguish truth from falsehood. She could not refuse to take her husband's word or to accept his explanation ; yet, though she was still unwilling to doubt where she had given her faith, she had the instinctive feeling that, to some extent at least, he was deceiving her.

'Devil take it all !' said Claude Meredith to himself as he lit a cigar after his wife had gone to bed. 'Here's a business, to be sure ! I'd better have destroyed that paper, I suppose. To think of its falling into *her* hands, of all people ! Is she satisfied now, I wonder ? I hardly think it ; she's not one of those women who swallow everything. And that fishy communication through the bank to-day ! I wonder if anyone's on the scent ? Somebody been inquiring for the address of Frank Calvert's executor at the Kimberley Bank who refused to give his name—what for, I wonder ? It's deuced mysterious ! Of course he got nothing for his pains, and, probably, he's only one of the poor fellow's debtors. Still, one doesn't like anonymous inquirers. I did right in telling my Newcastle bankers to wire "Take no notice." We shall most likely hear no more of the matter. If only my luck doesn't fail me ! Well, it's no use worrying.'

He threw himself back in his easy chair and smoked an expensive cigar—Claude Meredith never stinted himself in luxuries—with would-be relish. But his spirit worked uneasily in spite of bodily repose ; it divined trouble ahead, and took fright, like a nervous horse, at the shadow. His boat was in the tideway now, however, for weal or woe ; there seemed no escape from the current. He saw nothing for it but to let himself drift whither destiny might take him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SHOWS THE SET OF THE CURRENT

On we drift : where looms the dim port ?

One, Two, Three, Four, Five, contribute their quota.

R. BROWNING : *Master Huguss of Saxe-Gotha*.

Two or three weeks went by without further incident. Though between Evelyn and her husband there was no longer quite the same ease of intercourse, there was yet no serious breach. Outwardly, all seemed much the same ; and though, inwardly, each was conscious of a something which, like a mist, chilled their love and hid their thoughts from each other, it was too intangible to be taken hold of or resented by either of them.

Claude tried to forget that she had so much as called him in question, even for a moment. And Evelyn resolutely turned her back upon the uneasy feeling which had crept into her mind. To natures such as his disagreeable things are so unwelcome that, unless they become importunate, they are usually sent to the right-about as soon as possible. While, in loving and loyal hearts like Evelyn's, doubt, though it find a lodgment at unawares, germinates but slowly, as a seed in an uncongenial soil. As by common consent, the subject of the paper was dropped and no allusion made to the discussion which it had occasioned.

Both husband and wife were fully occupied, and there is nothing like occupation for clearing the moral atmosphere and keeping the air sweet. It is the finest of moral

sanitary prescriptions, as those who have tried it, when there is miasma and malaria about, will be ready to allow.

Evelyn had her house to set in order and preparations to make for keeping Christmas, according to her husband's wishes, in the good old English style, as be seemed a Squire of Hatherlea. While Claude spent half his days superintending improvements out-of-doors, and the other half in electioneering business, a vacancy being expected through the forthcoming retirement of the sitting member, and Meredith having been chosen as the Liberal Unionist candidate. This gave him an importance which he thoroughly enjoyed, and banished into the background of his mind less pleasing subjects.

It was now early in December, and electioneering meetings were fixed to take place in various parts of the division, so that Claude had a further object of interest in the preparation of his speeches. This was a safe ground for discussion between husband and wife ; and, though Meredith was not a whit behind most husbands in upholding the masculine against the feminine intellect, he was, also like the majority of the male sex, very ready to make use of his wife's help in securing that enviable supremacy.

'Just listen to this, Evie,' he would say ; 'how does it strike you ? You're not a voter, certainly. Thank heaven we're still spared the enormity of female suffrage ! But you could, perhaps, put yourself into the place of one for a moment.'

And Evelyn would listen and suggest, till, in the end, it came to pass that her quiet tact and clear judgment secured for her a co-operation in the authorship of the speeches, which her husband was far from suspecting. It was considered wonderful that 'a man from the Colonies' could produce compositions so well expressed, and showing such a masterly grasp on the subject of home policy. But, as usual when there is *kudos* in the matter, nobody thought

of seeking for the woman. It is only when mischief has been worked that one searches for her.

‘By the way, Claude, have you heard that Gilbert is coming home?’

Mrs. Meredith looked up from her corner of the fire, one evening, to ask the question of her partner, who was sitting opposite to her in the agonies of composition. He made a sound of impatience between his teeth, dropping the pencil from his lips, as he brought his mind down from the heights to notice this puerile interruption.

‘Gilbert—who’s Gilbert?’ he asked absently.

‘Why, Gilbert Clavering, of course; who else should it be?’ was Evelyn’s rejoinder. ‘As usual, now-a-days, you’re wool-gathering, dear Claude, or you wouldn’t have asked the question.’

‘I don’t know him by his Christian name, as you seem to do, Evelyn.’ Claude Meredith’s mouth tightened, as it usually did when he was annoyed. Evelyn noticed the sign and raised her eye-brows.

‘Like all the rest of the Hatherlea people, I’ve known him for so long that his name is quite familiar to me,’ she answered, with a touch of sarcasm. ‘He’s only “Mr. Clavering” to new-comers, like you. Besides, he’s a sort of kinsman—through my mother, you know. But that’s not what I wanted to say. It was the Miss Williamsons who gave me the news, this afternoon. Miss Maria has had a letter from him, telling her he has had enteric and is ordered home to his native air. They are terribly distressed that they cannot ask him to stay with them on his arrival. But, as usual, they’re going to spend Christmas with their brother in London. I’ve been thinking, Claude—she made a little hesitating pause, and glanced appealingly across the hearth-rug at her husband’s knitted brow—‘it would be kind to ask him here, wouldn’t it?’

'Kind or not, I'm not inclined to do it, Evelyn.' Meredith drew in his lips, as a dog does who is ready to snap. 'I don't see any cause for me to show kindness to that man, or why he should take up his quarters here.'

'Why? Only because it seems the proper thing for a Clavering to stay at his own house——' began Evelyn sharply. But her husband caught her up.

'His own house! Really, my dear, you seem obstinately wedded to that ridiculous notion. Haven't I told you before, that when a man sells his property it's no longer his own? I wish you wouldn't be so sentimental; he has no further rights in the estate whatever.'

'Not in law, perhaps. But there's such a thing as courtesy, though you don't seem——' Evelyn stopped and bit her lips, then changed the sentence. 'What I mean is, that, if anyone has a right to stay in this house, even though it *has* changed owners, it is one of the old family. It will look most inhospitable if a Clavering has to go to the inn when he comes to his native place.'

'Then he'd better stay away. What is he coming back here for, I wonder? Shows very bad taste, I think, after all that's happened.'

Claude Meredith threw his notes upon the table with a gesture that was more than impatient. Nor did Evelyn show her usual tact; for she continued the discussion, though the line which divides the expedient from the undesirable was far overpassed.

'Haven't I told you why he is coming? The reason is plain enough. The doctors say he will never recover properly till he returns to his native air. He has been dangerously ill, it seems. Besides, what is there to keep him away? That business about poor little Bertie was unfortunate, indeed; but no one could blame Gilbert for what was pure accident.'

‘Gilbert, again ! I wish you wouldn’t call that man by his Christian name ; under the circumstances it’s most objectionable. Women don’t generally remain on such familiar terms with their old admirers ; that circumstance alone would prevent my asking him here.’

‘Claude !’ The angry colour flooded Evelyn’s face. She got up hurriedly, letting the work she was busy with—reel, thimble, scissors, and all—fall, with a clatter into the fender.

Meredith saw that he had gone too far.

‘Well,’ he said more quietly, ‘I don’t mean anything offensive, Evie ; so you needn’t flare up like that. You mean no harm, I know ; only, like most women, you don’t consider—we have to think of Mrs. Grundy, you know. There we’ll let the subject drop. We won’t quarrel over that beggar, will we, dear ? He’s nothing to us, when all’s said and done. I want you to listen to what I’ve been jotting down ; it doesn’t run quite smoothly yet, I think.’

CHAPTER XXIX

FROM OUT THE YEARS

Voices, long silent now, with thee are waking
 From out the years. SONG.

‘REALLY, it’s most unfortunate that we should have to go away just now, isn’t it, Teresa?’ said Miss Williamson to her sister, two days before their annual flight to London. Though the journey was made every year in consequence of an invitation which regularly arrived at the same date, and though, had it not done so, Miss Maria would have been the first to lament the omission, she had never been known to leave Hatherlea to spend her Christmas in London without some such expressions of discomposure.

‘It seems almost like defrauding one’s poorer neighbours to shut up house at this time of year, doesn’t it, Teresa? And though, of course, we’re doing our best to make up to them by leaving our little doles and presents behind us, yet it’s never the same thing. I could almost have wished that dear John and Ellen hadn’t asked us, this time, though it would have been the first break since they married, fifteen years ago, and it would almost seem as though the world had come to an end if we didn’t eat our Christmas dinner all together. Yet, with Gilbert coming, it is particularly inconvenient.’

‘Then, don’t go, Maria,’ was her sister’s practical rejoinder. ‘You can stay behind, and I will go and explain matters. There’s no earthly reason you should be dragged to London against your will.’

'Oh, but *that* wouldn't do at all, sister !' Like many other people, Miss Williamson commonly faced about when others took her too readily at her word, at least in matters of this sort. 'It wouldn't be the same thing if we didn't both go. John and Ellen wouldn't like it. And, besides, as they *have* asked us, it would seem ungracious to refuse the invitation.'

'Oh, very well, then there's no more to be said ; besides, our clothes are already packed. You go on with sorting out your tracts, Maria, and I'll see to the tea and sugar. It's well there's somebody to attend to such mundane things. "The Lord will provide," you say ? Certainly, sister, I don't deny that ; but He usually needs a human agent to help Him ; and I'm that humble instrument, in this house, at least.'

Miss Teresa bustled away to her store-room, leaving her sister in the sitting-room with her bundle of tracts. She sat down to apportion them at her writing-table, with a long sigh.

'I wish dear Teresa wasn't so profane !' she murmured ; 'she doesn't mean any harm, I'm sure—it's only her queer way of looking at things. The Lord, I trust, will forgive her, as one who speaks, in a manner, ignorantly. Now, let me see. I hope I shall be guided to choose the right word for the right person. There's Willie Kindred, he's a difficult subject. Shall I send him "No Room in the Inn" ?' She thought a moment, with uplifted pen, before putting the tract into its wrapper ; then, a sudden recollection struck her, and she laid the leaflet aside. 'No,' she said ; 'he might think it pointed. I quite forgot he'd been turned out of the Clavering Arms for disorderly conduct. I'll send him "Peace on Earth"—that's appropriate, and not too suggestive.'

The selection required much delicate weighing of *pros* and *cons* ; and Miss Williamson, as usual, gave her whole

mind to the business. She was soon so absolutely absorbed as to be oblivious of her surroundings. She never so much as observed the arrival at the little white garden gate of an elderly man in shabby clothes, who stood for a moment looking at the house, with its trellised porch and ivied walls, before coming further. He, evidently, noticed the spinster, sitting, with bent head and much-cumbered face, over the piles of tracts which strewed the writing-table in the French window, to the left of the front door ; for, instead of keeping to the straight gravel walk which led to the latter, between the empty box-borders, he stepped across the beds, and, crossing the sodden grass-plot, came to a pause outside the window. His spare figure, with its slight stoop at the shoulders, though otherwise upright and of soldierly bearing, darkened the light a little. But still Miss Maria failed to notice the presence of anything unusual. For quite two minutes he stood there, attentively examining the still comely countenance and soft complexion of the busy old lady, who, with her cap a little awry on her masses of fair hair, sat biting the end of her pen inside the room. Then, despairing, apparently, of attracting her notice without some demonstration on his part, the visitor raised an ungloved hand, not by any means too clean, and rapped on the window-pane. Then Miss Williamson looked up, with a start, that nearly overturned the ink-bottle, and got to her feet in alarm. She seemed about to call out or to run away. But the stranger put his finger to his lips and made a sign as though he would entreat her to open the window. Why Miss Maria obeyed him she could not afterwards have told. Perhaps, there was something in the appearance of the man which suggested better days, and appealed to the tender heart of a woman who never could turn away from any that needed help. Perhaps, the mingled entreaty and command, which he threw into his mute appeal, worked on her against her

will. At any rate, she opened the window sufficiently to hear what he had to say. The damp, leaf-mouldy wind blew in at the opening, fluttering the leaves of the tracts and sending the Inn, the Manger, Angels, and Shepherds, flying together, pell-mell, upon the floor. Miss Maria tried to stop this dislocation of her carefully-sorted bundles by weighting them hastily with books and paper-cutters; but, on a word from the stranger, she soon desisted, and transferred her attention from them to him.

‘Don’t you know me, Maria?’ he said.

The faded spinster looked up into the lined and battered face of the elderly man, with the expression of a puzzled child. A whole history of wasted energies and dissipated powers was written there, in hieroglyphics not to be misunderstood. But there was something besides, which caused the innocent eyes of the good woman to cloud and flicker, and her gentle mouth to work distressfully. What was it that she saw there to disturb the placidity of a heart that had so long slept, unruffled by any personal trouble, reflecting the serenity of Heaven’s own peace, like a sheltered pool which no rough wind can reach?

She looked at him long and doubtfully, then—‘Robert Ford?’ she said, inquiringly. ‘It’s never you!’

‘Ay, but it is,’ answered the voice, which, though not without culture, was hoarse and unsteady, as though its owner had misused his instrument, and it were no longer wholly serviceable. ‘I thought your memory would have been better than it is, Maria; I’d have known *you* anywhere.’

‘You’re changed, Robert, sadly changed.’

‘Like enough,’ was the bitter answer. ‘I’ve had enough to change me, since you sent me about my business. And you’ve altered as well—in some ways. Yet, I’ve never forgotten *you*—one doesn’t so easily forget.’

'That is true, Robert. There are some things one cannot forget.'

'No? Then, for the sake of old times, will you give me a little help?'

Miss Maria felt a sudden chill; her heart had beaten more quickly while her old lover spoke of the past, and she had been touched to tears by his persistent memory of her. But the sudden change from sentiment to almost whining request, the greedy look in the man's shifty eyes, as they rested on a pile of half-crowns, which lay, ready for distribution, among the tracts, put an end to the notion that he had come with no other object than to see her once again.

'What is it you want?' she asked unsteadily, and threw a quick glance over her shoulder at the door.

He saw her movement, and put up his hand. 'For heaven's sake, don't call anyone, Maria!' he said hastily. 'You've nothing to fear from me. The fact is, I've just landed from South Africa—been serving there in one of the irregular troops against the Boers—and I'm short of funds. I didn't know where to turn—for I've been out of this country for years—till I thought of you. "Maria Williamson will help me," I said to myself; "she was always a good sort, though she treated me cruelly once." So here I am. I wanted a sight of you badly, besides.'

The words were added as an afterthought, and served still further to chill the woman's tender heart, in which the memory of her only love-episode had, though her soul had disapproved it, been laid up, like fine linen in lavender, as something precious and apart.

'Is it money you want?' she asked, the light dying out of her faded eyes.

'Right you are, Maria! One can't live without the needful, and I've come to my last copper.'

He watched her closely, as she opened the drawer of her

writing-table and took out her old knitted purse. It looked ominously lean to his greedy eyes.

With hands that shook a little, Miss Williamson emptied the contents on to her blotter—three sovereigns, five shillings and a few pence. Ford's face fell, as she handed them to him. 'It's all I have at present,' she said, with a falter of the voice, 'Teresa keeps the household purse.'

'Well,' was the ungracious answer, 'it's not much for a needy man, is it, Maria? But it'll have to do for the present, I suppose. By the way, who lives at the big house here, whose gates I passed on my way from the station? Anyone likely to help a poor soldier from South Africa? To have fought in the war is, usually, a passport to charity, now-a-days.'

'To charity? Have you come to *that*, Robert?' There was distress in Miss Williamson's voice; and, humble old lady though she thought she was, the colour came to her cheek. She felt ashamed for the man she had once idealised.

'No use clinging to sentiment when everything else has gone,' was the half-defiant answer. 'But you haven't answered my question as to who lives at the Hall.'

'The Merediths live there now,' was the hesitating reply; 'they bought it from the Claverings—the old family, that is—about a year ago. You may have met them?—the last and the present owner I mean; they've both been in the war.'

A look of sudden interest came into the dissipated face. He seemed searching in his mind for a half-effaced recollection.

'Meredith—Clavering?' he muttered. 'I seem to remember something about the names. *Could* it have been? Well, I must think.' Then aloud: 'Do you know if the Merediths are at home?'

'They're away at present.' Miss Williamson thanked

Heaven in her heart that she could give this answer. 'But, oh, Robert! You wouldn't, really, beg? I'm different, you know. I *wish* I could have given you more; but I really haven't got it. If I were to ask Teresa——'

'No, don't do that. And, Maria, you'll not mention my visit to anybody, will you?'

'Why should I? It'll be between ourselves, as—as all the rest has been, Robert. I never told anybody.'

'No? That's just as well. Good-bye, Maria. It's done me good to see you; it has, indeed. Will you shake hands?' He put out his soiled and coarsened hand—the spoilt hand of one who had been a gentleman. The pure-souled woman laid her own delicately-kept member—for though careless about her dress, Miss Williamson was scrupulous about her person—in his, without a moment's hesitation.

'Good-bye, Robert,' she said, as she had once said the same words long years before, 'and God bless you.'

He wrung her hand without speaking. Perhaps, he could not do so; for the most hardened heart is touched sometimes. Then he turned, stepped again over the winter border into the little gravel-walk, opened the small white gate and walked away.

'Why, Maria! Bless the woman, what's the matter now? The window open, and you in a thorough draught, with all the tracts on the wing, and on such a day! You'll catch your death of cold before ever we get to London.' Miss Teresa stood aghast on the threshold, with a bundle of labels in her hand. But she soon recovered sufficiently to shut the door behind her and to close the window.

Miss Williamson turned a white, absent face towards her sister, as the latter took her by the shoulders and put her aside to accomplish the latter task. Miss Teresa looked at her rather anxiously.

‘Are you not well?’ she asked; ‘there’s *something* the matter, I’m certain. Who’s that man in the road? He’s been here, I do declare, for he’s left the gate open! Has he been begging? He’s frightened you, I can see. Did you give him anything?’

‘Well, yes. One can’t turn one’s face from the poor, especially at Christmas time, can one, sister?’ was the faintly apologetic answer.

‘Can’t one? Well, I’m not stiff-necked, at any rate, whatever you may be, Maria. Was he rough to you? You may as well tell me all about it.’

But Miss Williamson never told anyone ‘all about it,’ not to her dying day.

CHAPTER XXX

GILBERT CLAVERING FINDS AN INTEREST IN LIFE

VICT. Love is ever busy with his shuttle,
Is ever weaving into life's dull warp
Bright, gorgeous flowers.

Perhaps, hereafter,
When she shall learn how heartless is the world,
A voice within her will repeat my name,
And she will say, 'He was indeed my friend!'

LONGFELLOW: *The Spanish Student*.

THE 'private parlour' of the Clavering Arms looked shabbier and less luxurious by over a year's wear, than it had done when Claude Meredith inhabited it on his first arrival at Hatherlea Bridge. The horse-hair sofa and chairs were as stubby in places as a working man's face on a Friday evening. The crimson carpet, now faded to a dull maroon, required circumspect walking to avoid the pit-falls offered by the 'worn spots,' as Mrs. Ridley euphemistically called them, which even her clever contriving could not in every case bring under hearthrug or piece of furniture. Wall-paper and paint, whatever artistic tints they may once have boasted, had become permanently toned down to sober drab. The ceiling was grimy, the paper flowers in the vases on the chimneypiece faded out of all resemblance to the real thing, and even the picture of Queen Victoria in her widow's dress was not more sombre than the once gay hunting and battle-pieces upon the walls.

Gilbert Clavering, looking miserably thin and haggard,

shivered a little, right down to the bottom of his heart, as he sat in the best preserved armchair, over a fire which puffed and sulked in the unaccustomed grate.

'It's a while since we set her on, Mr. Clavering, sir, you see,' said Mrs. Ridley, in her voice of please-sir-make-the-best-of-it, as she set the poker upside down against the bars. 'Dr. Woodward told me to be sure and air t'room, and Ah did ma best wi' open windeys and sich like. But the weather was again' the fior. She winnot burn in a nor'-west wind, dae what ye can to persuade hor. It's nor'-east this evenin,' that's why she's nobbut horf disinclined. She'll, mebbes, torn her mind to it, presently, wi' the coaxin' Ah'm givin' hor. We worn't expectin' ye till to-morrow, ye see.'

Gilbert accepted his landlady's excuses in silence ; he was far too weary and dispirited to find fault. This return to his native place was even more painful than he had expected. But there was a something, deep down in his heart, which drew him North, in spite of his repugnance, and he had followed his doctor's orders without resistance. He had not counted, however, on the depressing and irritating powers of such little 'trifles' as a badly burning fire and an atmosphere of mould and stale tobacco. And yet he might have known that the latter, at least, would be all-pervading, when he wrote for the bedroom and 'private parlour' of the Hatherlea Arms.

'You shall have your dinnor as soon as ivvor we can get it ready, sor,' said Mrs. Ridley cheerfully, as she left the fire, which had begun to smile on her efforts, and prepared to leave the room. 'While ye're waitin' on it, Ah'll make ye a cup o' tea, and butter ye a tea-cake ; ye're lookin' a bit wor'-out like. Well, to be sure, if this isn't the doctor ! Come in, sor. We've gotten Mistor Clavering arlready, ye see.'

Dr. Woodward came in, laid aside his weather-battered felt hat, and took the hand of the man who was to be his

patient with his grasp of tender roughness. He looked Gilbert Clavering full in the face with scrutinising gaze. 'Well, sir !' he said, in his brusque though genial tone, 'so you've landed up ? If your doctors had consulted me, I'd have told them to keep you till the spring ; they don't know what Hatherlea Bridge can be in winter. But there's a deal in native air, after all ; and, if only we can keep you cold-proof, you may pick up quicker than in the south ; it all depends on that. I wish you'd had more comfortable quarters than Mrs. Ridley's to come to, however. What a beast of a fire ! If I'd been a married man, now—but my housekeeper won't put up with visitors.'

'Oh, never mind, doctor ; I'm all right here,' was Gilbert's would-be careless answer. But he looked very woe-begone, notwithstanding, as he crouched over the undecided fire. 'As for picking up, I don't know about that. It's been touch-and-go with me, and I'm not making any right progress yet ; that's why the doctors have sent me off, I expect. They don't like patients to die on their hands.'

'Die ! Fiddlesticks about dying !' growled the north-country practitioner ; 'there's no question of that at present, Clavering, whatever there may be thirty or forty years hence—so put that out of your mind. What you've got to think about is recovery. We must find something to interest you, and to take your mind off your health. That's what you want—rousing, rousing, my dear sir !'

'Perhaps ; I'm not much interested in life at present,' answered Gilbert, with a wan smile. 'It's not a very interesting affair for a man like me, in any case.'

'Nonsense ! It's always interesting—to every healthy-minded individual, at any rate. We've got to make what we can of it for the good of this old round world, if not for our own ; that's why we are put here, I take it. To shape and to contrive are always interesting, isn't it ?'

‘But the “shaping” is just what we don’t seem able to manage. “There’s a Divinity,” you know, Woodward.’

‘Yes, in the last resort, certainly. The Master Workman may interfere with our ’prentice efforts, if He sees He can make something better of them. Still, He allows us a pretty free hand, as a rule. He gives us the materials and the tools, and expects us to use them to the best of our ability. But my trade isn’t preaching; that’s the parsons’ business, and a very poor business they make of it, as a rule, in my humble opinion! I sometimes think I could do a deal better in the pulpit myself, though my tongue isn’t the pen of a ready writer, as a rule, you know. Well, can I post you up in the news? Where shall we begin?’

Gilbert looked up. ‘Tell me how everybody is,’ he said; ‘you, as a doctor, ought to know.’

‘Meaning by “everybody” your old acquaintances, I suppose?’ asked the old man, with a shrewd glance at his patient out of his keen grey eyes. ‘Shall I begin at the Hall and work downwards? Very well. Your cousin’s widow, Mrs. Clavering, is married again—to Tinniswood, the ’torney, as I suppose you know. Mr. and Mrs. Meredith are, to all appearance, on the book of health; though, perhaps, they hardly look quite so magnificently exuberant as they did on their return from Switzerland. But that is hardly to be expected. Those who live in the honeymoon are regaled on nectar and ambrosia—so folk say, at least; and the meat and drink of the gods should make men immortal. It’s apt to fail, however, once they come down to common earth again. But you and I know nothing of such experiences; we are wiser than to risk our peace of mind for any amount of problematical rapture, eh, Clavering?’

Gilbert winced at the sudden touch on his old wound.

CLAVERING FINDS AN INTEREST IN LIFE 291

And the doctor saw it, as well as the quick concealment of the momentary pain.

'Then, to move to the Rectory, the Canon has had the gout (better again now, however), to show he's not quite the ascetic. And Lady Margaret has a feverish cold, which she calls influenza—to be in the fashion, I suppose. The Miss Williamsons of the Cottage are away; but you know that, of course—you'd have been there, otherwise, instead of in this magnificent hotel. I wonder they didn't ask you to the Hall; there's plenty of room there, in all conscience. And it would have been only natural for a Clavering to go to his own——' The doctor stopped and coughed. He had blundered on to terribly thin ice in his efforts to entertain his patient. But he slid off again with all possible haste.

'You've heard about the coming election, I suppose? And that Meredith is to stand? He's a pretty good chance, people say. Wonderful good speaker—I haven't heard him yet, myself; but if human ills will permit me, I mean to attend the big meeting at Hexham, when it comes off. Well, good evening, Clavering; here's your tea-tray coming, and I've a patient to see, half a mile out. I only just heard you'd come when I was up at the station, and I thought I'd look in at once and see if you needed any attention. Now, don't forget my prescription.'

He nodded good-humouredly, and walked quickly away from the inn into the fast-falling darkness. 'I call it a shame,' he said to himself, 'to let one of the old family go into that dog-kennel of a place—in such health too! Meredith is sadly wanting in a sense of the fitness of things, or he'd never have allowed it. I wonder Mrs. Meredith didn't insist; *she* knows better, at any rate. But he's a wilful man, I'm thinking. And, maybe, the husband's inclined to be jealous; both men wanted her—

and, at one time, everybody thought she'd have taken Clavering. Better for her if she had, spite of the money, it seems to me. If she's a happy woman, I'm mistaken. But it's no affair of mine, only I don't like to see the decay of hospitality at a place like Hatherlea Hall.'

In pursuance of his reflections, Dr. Woodward mentioned his anxiety concerning his patient to Meredith himself, when, next morning, he met him in the train on his way to Newcastle.

'He's in sadly low spirits,' said the doctor, referring to Clavering, 'and this is much against his recovery. If you could do anything to make things more cheerful for him, Mr. Meredith, it would be a kindness to me as well as to him. It would be politic as well. Hatherlea Bridge has a personal interest in its old feudal lords, and attention to one of the family on your part would be considered a very graceful thing.'

Claude made no immediate rejoinder. But that he marked and inwardly digested the doctor's hint was shown by some words he said to Evelyn, the very same evening :

'That fellow Clavering has arrived, by the way, dear. I met Woodward in the railway-carriage, and he told me he's staying at the inn. I suppose we'd better ask him to dinner, on Christmas Day ? It's a bore, certainly, and will spoil our family party ; but I suppose it's the proper thing.'

Evelyn's face brightened.

'Why, yes,' she said heartily, 'it would be only kind. I was sure you'd think so, in the end, Claude.'

'Think so ? Can't say I see why you want to have him so much, Evie—he's such a surly chap. But, in our position, hospitality is expected ; and I always like to do the right thing. Let me see, if he's to come, we might as well ask a few others as well, besides the Canon and Lady

Margaret ; it would be less awkward. Suppose we have Dr. Woodward ?'

'By all means, if you like ; but I wouldn't ask anyone else. He squares the party, you see ; and I'm sure Gilbert will prefer to be quiet.'

'Gilbert !' Meredith muttered the obnoxious name under his breath, though he kept it from taking voice. 'Hang the fellow ! I wish he'd stayed in Africa !' He glanced at his wife, but she looked as innocent and unconscious as the Christmas roses which nestled in the bodice of her gown.

'Very well,' she said, after pausing a moment for the answer that did not come. 'I'll write the notes. Will you call ?'

'On Mr. Clavering ? No, I haven't time. Richard can take my card when he leaves the note. Not the same thing ? Hang it all, why should one be so ceremonious ? The man has no position now.'

The indignant blood rushed up into Evelyn's face ; and, as she often did on such occasions, she spoke unadvisedly with her lips.

'All the more reason that we should consider his feelings, I should have thought !' she retorted.

But, for once in a way, Claude chose the better part, and took no notice.

Next morning, Richard, the footman at the Hall, who had been engaged to supplement old Thomas, left a card and note at the Clavering Arms.

Mrs. Ridley, fully alive to the importance of the occasion, bustled into the parlour and presented them to her boarder on her smartest tray, holding its bright edge respectfully with the corner of her apron. 'It's the footman from the Hall,' she said, 'and he's waiting for an answer.'

Gilbert, who was shivering over the fire, looked up, recognised the handwriting on the dainty envelope, and flushed.

'Come back in ten minutes,' he said, with an apparent unconcern which belied the flush.

Mrs. Ridley would have liked to have stayed to witness the reading of the note, and perhaps, share in its contents. But Gilbert's tone gave her no encouragement. 'Claverings arlways *was* upsettin'!' she muttered to herself, as she shut the door, 'and this one beats t' record. Ah *did* think he'd hev been pleased-like that they've noticed him at last. But no; he's a deal over prood. Not but what Merediths is mushrooms to Claverings, when arl's said and done! But, then, they hev the brass.'

Spite of his unconcern in the presence of Mrs. Ridley, Gilbert's hand trembled suspiciously as he tore open Evelyn's envelope.

The note was commonplace enough. Evelyn had not been able, for shame's sake, to say what she would have liked to have said. A wife cannot do that to a third person, where her husband is concerned. So she had contented herself with a simple expression of regret for Gilbert's illness, wherewith to cover the bareness of the invitation.

But by the lonely man, whose only interest on earth was centred in the writer of this very ordinary note, every word of it was relished. Yes, of course he would go, since Evelyn asked him. Meredith's scant courtesy was put aside as carelessly as his card. The husband was not worth a thought. But the wife—— Yes, he would see her again, and judge for himself whether she were really happy. If she were, he could, Gilbert thought, be tolerably content. If she were not—well, at any rate, he should know. In any case, he said to himself, he was not afraid to meet her again. He had conquered himself, and there was no longer any danger, either to himself or her.

So he wrote his answer, and gave it to Mrs. Ridley, with the information that he would 'dine out' on Christmas Day.

‘That’s arl reit,’ she said to her husband, as she handed the note to the footman. ‘It’s the proper thing ; and we’ll keep wor own Christmas the better, wanting him, poor gentleman !’

Poor Gilbert ! Nobody seemed to want him, nobody in the world. Even Evelyn, under the eyes of her husband and father and stepmother, refrained from giving him too warm a welcome to his old home. She was evidently embarrassed when he came into the room ; and, though she recovered herself immediately, she was not, at any time during that evening, the same old Evie he used to know. Could he have looked into her heart he would have seen shame for the want of hospitality, intense pity for his forlornness and evident want of strength, together with an indignation which, denied outward expression, gave to her manner a stiffness most unusual with her. No, the dinner was not a success. There was the Christmas stalled ox, indeed, with all the proper accompaniments, upon the table ; but the spirit of Christmas was not there. Meredith was off-hand, and wanting in tact. Evelyn, graceful hostess though she was, had strangely little to say. The Canon’s gout made him discontented with all the world. Lady Margaret was nervously afraid of draughts. Only the doctor was as usual, and kept the ball going with all his might. And Gilbert sat at what should have been his own table, under the eyes of his pictured ancestors, who seemed to frown down from the walls in stern disapproval of the trick that Fortune had played, and felt more like an exile and an outcast than ever.

He took his leave as early as politeness would permit ; and went back, to find the parlour fire gone out, and Mrs. Ridley quite too much absorbed in her own merry-making to be so much as aware that her guest had returned to claim the attention which he did not get.

Gilbert had not even the poor satisfaction of knowing whether Evelyn's marriage was a success. He was inclined to think it was not. But that question must be set aside for future solution.

Had it not been for this uncertainty, Gilbert felt that, so far as he was concerned, it would have suited him best to turn his back on Hatherlea Bridge forthwith. But he told himself that he could not go till he was sure how things stood at the Hall. Possibly, Evelyn needed help; and if he could help her, well then, his own interests were as nothing in comparison with hers. So he stayed on. And, it happened that, after all, he and Evelyn saw a good deal of each other. Meredith was much away on electioneering business; and, apparently, politics absorbed him to the exclusion of more personal affairs. For he ceased to trouble his head about Gilbert, and seldom so much as mentioned him to his wife. So the two old comrades fell gradually back into the ease of their former intercourse before Gilbert's passion had awakened to trouble it. Whether or not she were happy with her husband, her former lover found it difficult to decide; at any rate, he and she were able to get a good deal of quiet satisfaction out of the renewal of their friendship. Evelyn was, evidently, pleased to see him whenever they met; and, as for Gilbert, he was as happy in her presence as was compatible with her possession by another man; so happy, indeed, that Dr. Woodward smiled to himself at the marked improvement in his patient's health, which could hardly be attributed altogether to his native air, or to the fact that he was now comfortably quartered at the Cottage.

'He's found something to interest him again, and to make life worth living. *That's* the secret of his marvellous recovery,' said the shrewd old man to himself. 'I only hope it'll not prove too interesting—for even health may be bought too dear.'

CHAPTER XXXI

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS

What hangman's hands
 Pin to his breast a parchment? his own bands
 Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst!

R. BROWNING: *Childe Roland*.

ONE afternoon in February, Mrs. Meredith was walking up the avenue on her return from the village. The south-west wind blew her garments about her and tugged at her hat, and she walked with her usually upright head a little bent. The first snowdrops were ringing a peal of silver bells in the moss at the foot of the old elms, and the rooks were swaying and swinging on the tossing branches, as they had swayed and swung full many a time since the rookery was founded, nobody could say how long before; for the Hatherlea rooks were of a family as old, if not older, than the Claverings. Through the latticed roof overhead came an occasional shaft of sunlight, as the clouds rushed by, allowing for a moment a little space of cobalt blue to vary the prevailing grey, and to cast heaven's light upon the path.

It was, in short, an afternoon just such as February turns out, year after year, with but little alteration. Nor were Evelyn's thoughts of any special colour, grave or gay, as she walked up the familiar avenue towards the old grey house.

There was nothing to announce to her, any more than there is to most of us, the near approach of something which

was to cut a trench across her path and alter the whole course of life.

Not till he was quite close to her did she become aware of a tall, spare man, in a shabby coat and battered felt hat, with the familiar South African catch-up of the brim, coming down the avenue from the house.

'I beg your pardon, madam,' he said; 'but are you Mrs. Meredith?'

Evelyn stopped and looked up. The wind caught at her hat as she raised her head, and she had to lift her hand to steady it. The gesture looked like a salute. The man smiled and copied it in correct military fashion, with an insolence of manner which could not be mistaken.

'I've been in the army,' it seemed to say, 'and am, therefore, entitled to attention.'

Evelyn felt annoyed.

'Yes,' she said shortly, 'I'm Mrs. Meredith. What do you want with me?'

'I've come on important business with the Squire. They tell me he's away. When do you expect him back?'

'Not till late this evening.' Evelyn was loth to answer a man who spoke to her so masterfully; but she did not seem able to avoid it. 'He's attending a political meeting in Hexham,' she added, 'at the Town Hall. Perhaps you could see him as he leaves.'

'A meeting in Hexham? He told you that, did he?' The tone was still more disagreeable. 'Then it's not correct; he's trying to deceive us both. The meeting has been put off—Mr. Meredith must have known that.'

Evelyn raised her head indignantly, and tried to pass him. 'You have no right to speak to me like that,' she said, with her little haughty air; 'I told you who I was.'

But the man was not to be balked. He put himself again in her path.

If I can't see Mr. Meredith, I can leave a message for him with you,' he said firmly, but with less insolence of tone. 'He made an appointment with me for this afternoon, and if he's not here to keep it the fault is not mine. The business is too important to both of us to stand over. Shall I speak here, or go with you into the house?'

Evelyn thought a moment. She did not much like being alone with this man. But there was something in the way in which he spoke of 'important business,' which made her unwilling for his interview with her to be known to the servants.

'Say what you wish here,' she said stiffly, stepping back under the shelter of the elms, where the wind was less boisterous; 'and say it as shortly as you can.'

The man looked at her, and seemed to hesitate.

'After all, I'd better tell you the whole story,' he said, after a moment's pause. 'Man and wife are one; and you'll, may be, serve the purpose quite as well as your husband. I'll not keep you long, if you're in such a hurry; perhaps, when you know what brings me, you'll be in less haste. Did you ever know I fought in the same affair as that in which your husband and Mr. Frank Clavering came to grief, out in South Africa, and was wounded along with them?'

'No; how should I? I don't know who you are.'

'To be sure you don't; I forgot I hadn't introduced myself. Captain Ford, Mrs. Meredith.'

The shabby man took off his felt hat and bowed with an insolent flourish. Evelyn felt herself turn hot all over; but she said nothing.

'And he didn't know me either—your husband, I mean,' Captain Ford went on, 'not till I met him lately in Newcastle—not to really *know*, that is, though I've seen him out there more than once. It's only the other day

that I casually heard something which brought about an introduction—a pleasure on both sides I assure you, Mrs. Meredith.'

Again that disagreeable smile.

'But I forgot you were in a hurry ; I'll come to the point at once. I was, as I said, in the engagement where Frank Clavering died—was present at his death, in fact, though neither he nor Mr. Meredith knew of it ; for I was lying wounded under a heap of dead on the other side of the scrub, so that neither of them saw me. If they had, matters, maybe, would have fallen out differently. I heard everything that passed between them—heard Mr. Clavering solemnly confide his son, and all his possessions in trust for that son, to the care of your husband. There was a large quantity of valuable diamonds, he said, many thousand pounds worth ; they were, in fact, the bulk of the fortune, which made the transfer afterwards so convenient, you perceive. There was a sort of will-paper too, but it was not signed. Also very convenient. You understand ? Well, as it turned out, Mr. Clavering's son did not live to enjoy his father's bequest ; but his cousin—the next heir—as the dying man allowed, though he didn't seem to love him any more than most men do "next-heirs" like that—is living still, and, I'm told, is staying close by here at present. It's he who should own this place, in fact, and not your husband. The matter lies in a nutshell. Either Mr. Meredith makes it worth my while to hold my tongue, or Mr. Clavering does so to let it wag. You understand ?'

Yes, Evelyn understood ; the man had been plain enough. All the time he was speaking it had almost seemed to her that she knew exactly what he was going to say next. For she remembered, only too well, the 'sort of will-paper' to which he alluded ; and it both gave her a clue to the story and served as a voucher for its truth.

And yet the explanation, the assurance, as, at the moment, she felt it to be, of her husband's roguery was very terrible to the wife ; it struck upon brain and heart like a heavy blow. The roar of the wind in the elms, which went on, like an accompaniment, all through the story, seemed to come from a long way off, like the roar of the sea to the ears of a drowning man. Yet, outwardly, she was perfectly calm and quiet. Most of us are when the blow is heavy enough to stun the feelings ; it is afterwards, when the deadness passes off, that the real suffering begins.

The man in the felt hat looked at the graceful woman, standing there, wrapped in her pretty brown furs, with the wind blowing the tendrils of her tawny hair about the calm white forehead, with something of wonder and admiration in his eyes.

'By Jove, you're a plucky one !' he exclaimed ; 'you take it bravely, indeed ! Well, I'm sorry. It's no fault of yours, and I'd have spared you the story—a precious ugly one—if I could ; but you were bound to hear it sooner or later, you know. Your husband has treated me badly ; all he has given me, so far, has been a mere put-off—an insult to offer it, I say. Now, look here, what you have to do is to tell him that if he doesn't square matters in five days' time, when I shall call again, if I don't hear from him, meanwhile, appointing an interview elsewhere, I shall go straight to Mr. Clavering. Five days' time, not a moment more. You understand ?'

'I will give my husband your message,' answered Evelyn shortly ; and she moved from the shelter of the elms into the windy middle of the avenue. Ford looked after her for a minute, before he too moved off, on his way back to the station.

'A first-rate woman that !' he muttered, 'first-rate in every way. By Jove, she took it pluckily ! Most of them

would have fainted—but she never turned a hair. Yet she felt it keenly too ; I could see it in her eyes. She's as proud as they make them ; and it's the proud ones that suffer worst, though they say the least about it.'

Evelyn, meantime, walked on up the avenue, looking, to all appearance, much the same as she had done before Captain Ford had come in her way. But, in fact, she was a very different woman, with an outlook suddenly altered. Not that she realised this at first, or understood the full meaning of what had happened to her. Everything still seemed strangely far away. The rooks in the tree-tops, the snowdrops in the grass, even the house to which she was going—all might have been double the distance off to judge by her sensations. She felt the wind in her face, and heard its roar, still in the same curiously half-conscious fashion. Yet, all the while, it seemed to her that the story which had just been told her had not come as a surprise ; since the finding of that paper, a further revelation was only what might have been expected. That she had not been consciously expecting it—had, in fact, troubled herself wonderfully little, of late, about a matter which had threatened to give her constant anxiety, was, in reality, due to the fact that Gilbert Clavering had returned to turn the current of her thoughts. But of this Evelyn was not aware. It was only now, when, once more, the trouble had come to the front, that she knew how it had been working unperceived in the background of her mind, preparing her for further developments. It was on account of this that she accepted so unquestioningly the truth of the accusation against her husband. Once doubt has been admitted into the mind it works like leaven, destroying confidence. And this had been the case with Evelyn's once so perfect trust in Claude Meredith.

Her first impulse was to go straight to Gilbert Clavering

and tell him what she had heard ; but a little reflection showed, to Evelyn's usually sensible mind, the unwisdom of such a course. In the first place, it is the duty, under most circumstances, for a wife to shield her husband, not to betray him. In the second, no one has a right to condemn another, no matter how certain his guilt may appear, till he has had the opportunity of an explanation. Claude should have this, at any rate. She would keep the matter wholly to herself until his return, that evening. Then she would give the message, and ask him point-blank whether the story were true. He might lie to her, as, she now felt morally certain, he had lied before. But, this time, there should be no doubt about the matter. Evelyn told herself that she could not be deceived a second time. And if it were true—well, she would know how to act ; there should be no more shilly-shallying. The once sunny face of the young wife looked very dark, as she came to this conclusion. The sweet, soft eyes, the tender lips showed hard and pitiless. She was as one too cruelly wronged to have room for mercy. Her heart, as yet, was too stunned for feeling ; only her brain worked in a strangely lucid way. And, all the time, she kept perfectly quiet, dressing, sitting at table even, without any self-betrayal. It seemed to her that, not she herself, but someone else who had taken her bodily form was thinking, and speaking and acting for her. Even when all necessity for acting was over, and she was alone in her sitting-room, awaiting her husband's coming, that feeling of impersonality continued. She was waiting, and quietly waiting. When she had seen Claude and heard what he had to say, then, as she said to herself, there would be time enough for action.

CHAPTER XXXII

IN THE MAELSTROM

Left them to drive and drift
With the currents swift
Of the outward tide.

LONGFELLOW: *King Olaf's War-Horses.*

CLAUDE MEREDITH was late in coming; but then, he had told his wife he might, probably, be detained, and had ordered the carriage to meet two different trains. From the first it came back empty. Evelyn's pulses beat a little more quickly as the wheels came near; for her ears were sharpened by expectation, and she could hear the crunching on the gravel even amidst the noise of the wind. But she calmed down again when the carriage, instead of stopping before the door, drove round to the stable-yard. She sat down again in the chair from which she had risen, and tried to read; but failed to fix her attention on the words, and turned page after page without an idea of the sense.

Little Warlock kept her company, lying, for the most part, quietly at her feet, and only cocking his ears to listen at any unusual sound. He, also, had heard the wheels on the gravel; but knew better than to bark at what he seemed quite aware was 'the family coach' returning empty from the station. For dogs know a great deal about such matters, more than most human beings are willing to allow.

Ah, here was the master at last! Warlock was the first to be aware of his approach. The carriage was not empty, this time. He jumped up and ran to the door, uttering

little whimpers of welcome, as Meredith's voice sounded in the hall ; for, though Claude showed him but careless kindness, the dog was loyal, and acknowledged his ownership.

Evelyn's breath came quicker as she, too, heard the familiar voice and step ; but she did not rise from her chair ; she sat still, with her fingers tightly clasped together, waiting.

He did not come in at first. She heard him go into the dining-room, where a cold supper had been spread.

Well, she had waited long, she could be patient a little longer ; only, somehow, the waiting was hardly so easy now she had heard the familiar voice. Once upon a time how it would have set her heart a-beating with happy anticipation—she would not then have sat still, waiting for him to come to her.

How the wind roared in the trees, and moaned in the chimney ; and how annoying was the small, regular ticking of the little French clock upon the chimney-piece ! Evelyn was growing nervous ; but she was resolute, and would not flinch. If she waited till midnight she would come to an understanding with her husband before she slept ; on that she was determined. Some women would have been glad enough of an excuse to put off the evil hour ; but not so Mrs. Meredith.

Warlock, tired of trying to prevail on her to open the door for him, came back to the hearth-rug and lay down, with his nose on his paws and his ears erect, ready to spring up once more at the first sound of his master's step.

It came. The dog rushed to meet him ; the woman sat still.

‘ Well, Evie, still up ; you didn't hear me come in, I suppose ? I was so hungry I thought I'd have something at once. I was delayed, after all, much as I expected.’

Claude's voice sounded just as usual. He came to the

fire and stood there, warming his hands. Then Evelyn spoke.

‘There was no meeting at Hexham,’ she said, in a tone which sounded strange even in her own ears.

Meredith looked at her in surprise ; but still no suspicion of anything amiss seemed to dawn upon him.

‘No,’ he answered, ‘it was put off ; the evening was not found to suit the public. We went to Lavingham instead, and held an impromptu meeting for the pitmen. There were no end of questions I had to answer ; it all took time. But how did you know ?’

‘I did not till this afternoon. But you knew when you went. Why did you leave me in ignorance ?’

Tone and manner were no longer to be misunderstood. Claude Meredith turned round, with his back to the fire, and looked in astonishment at his wife. But still he was far from suspecting the truth.

‘Well,’ he said coldly, ‘I went off early, you see ; it did not seem necessary to disturb you by an explanation of what I only knew this morning. I was going, anyhow. There’s no harm done, is there ?’

‘There’s this : it’s all part of a systematic deception, it seems. I’m your wife ; but, nevertheless, I’m to be kept in the dark as to the truth of everything concerning you. More than that, you have all along been throwing dust in my eyes in order that I should only be allowed to see what you wish.’

‘Evelyn !’ There was pain in his voice, pain and reproach, and at last a growing fear.

But his wife went on inexorably. It was as though she were wound up, and was not to be stopped by any sense of pity.

‘Does what I say surprise you ?’ she asked, still in the same hard, quiet voice. ‘It should not. *You* have known

how things were from the very first. I was ignorant ; but now I am so no longer.'

'Good God, what has happened to you ? You seem to have lost your senses.'

'No, on the contrary, I have found them ; I know perfectly well what I am about, so you need not be afraid on that account. As to what has happened, that's simple enough. A man you should know, a Captain Ford, called to see you—by appointment, as he said ; and, not finding you at home—you went away, as it seems, thinking to avoid him—he told me his business and left you a message. Ah, I see you know the man and his business well enough ! Now, perhaps, you can understand what's "happened" to me, as you put it.'

The words were uttered still in the same quiet voice ; but there was withering sarcasm in it. At any other time Meredith would have been stung into anger. Now the sudden shock caused by the falling of the sword which so long had hung over his head, destroyed all other sensations. He shrank as though from a physical blow. The blood rushed to face and brain, and he was forced to steady himself against the chimney-piece. For some minutes he was incapable of uttering a word ; he felt blind and deaf.

Evelyn sat there, to all appearance, perfectly calm, watching him. She saw how he took her information and was confirmed in her opinion concerning his guilt, if confirmation had been necessary to support what was already moral assurance.

After a minute or two Meredith seemed to recover his balance, to some extent at least. He moved away from the fireplace and walked twice across the room and back again. Then he came back to his former position upon the hearth-rug ; but still he did not speak.

‘Well!’ The quiet word seemed to rouse the man like the touch of cold water.

‘Well, Evelyn,’ he said, almost as quietly, though she could see by the twitching of his mouth the difficulty he had in controlling himself; it was evidently the enforced quietness of grim necessity: ‘I should never have thought that *you* would have believed a blackguard’s witness against your husband. He has got hold of the wrong end of what was a confidential arrangement between myself and my poor friend, Frank Clavering, and is trying to get blackmail by threatening to give information to others who have nothing to do with a matter which, on account of its confidential nature, cannot be made public. I thought I had explained all this before. Cannot you be content to take my word for it?’

So he was lying to her again; he seemed determined to keep up the deception at all costs. Evelyn’s spirit rose. ‘No, I cannot,’ she said. ‘It is of no use denying your guilt—the man’s story was perfectly circumstantial and does not admit of a doubt; besides, you forget that I’ve seen that paper, which tallies with it in every way.’

Meredith swore. He accepted the fact that, on this point at least, his wife was not to be moved. For a moment his temper got the better of him.

‘Good heavens,’ he said (only the real words were a good deal more forcible), ‘I’ve got a judge for my wife, it seems, and a d——d hard one at that! Do you know where you’re driving, madam? A woman doesn’t generally want to wreck the family coach; she knows her own interests are identical with those of her husband.’

‘I’m not thinking of my own interests,’ was the answer, and the well-poised head went up a little higher—‘I want you to do what is right.’

‘Indeed? And what do you wish me to do?’

'The only thing possible, under the circumstances. You must go at once to Gilbert Clavering and tell him the whole story.'

Meredith swore again. 'D—— Gilbert Clavering !' he said savagely ; 'so that's your game ? You and your old lover have been mighty thick of late ; your husband's interests are to be sacrificed to his. *Gilbert Clavering !*'—he repeated the name with scornful emphasis—'is to come in and I'm to go out to make room for him : that is what you want ? I shouldn't have called such proceedings "right," at any rate, if I'd been you.'

The words, as well as the tone, were brutal. For a moment the calm in which Evelyn had wrapped herself was torn aside. If Meredith had struck her she could not have suffered more. It was a blow, not only to pride, but to every womanly feeling. She flushed crimson and shivered all over. But anger came to her aid and helped her to crush down the wounded susceptibilities and to recover the self-command which was so necessary to her purpose.

'Cowardly, as well !' she murmured, with a look in her eyes that her husband did not soon forget. 'But, never mind ; nothing you can say to me will make any difference now. If *you* do not tell Mr. Clavering, *I* shall.'

Meredith looked at her. Again he recognised the difficulty of moving such a woman as this. But he would not yet give up the attempt ; he could not afford to do so. He would fight the business to the end.

'You will ?' he said. 'Do you know what will be said of a woman who betrays her husband in such a manner ?'

'What will be said has nothing to do with my duty in the matter,' was the quiet answer ; 'that is perfectly plain.'

Her face was set like a flint. All its girlish softness seemed to have melted out of it under the fierce fire of

righteous indignation. Claude Meredith's heart misgave him. What if she should really do as she had said? He could not face the prospect; he would appeal to her feelings, since all other appeal had failed to move her.

'Evelyn,' he said, in a softer voice, and he came quite close and stood in front of her, like the suppliant that he was, 'you cannot, really, mean what you say? You could not so turn against me after all there has been between us. For the sake of the love you gave me, dear,—and love, they say, is stronger than everything else—for the sake of what we are to each other, which nothing can undo, do not throw me over.'

Was it all acting on Meredith's part? It did not seem so; his voice, always a rich and deep one, had the ring of real feeling in it—it even trembled a little. For the man's heart was really sore; and, with all his sins against her, he had never changed in his feelings towards his wife.

But, nevertheless, she laughed—a shrill hard laugh, which seemed to go through and through him.

'Oh!' she said scornfully, 'that sort of thing had best be left alone. We are nothing to each other now. And, as for love, you've killed all that effectually. Do you remember asking me, on our wedding-day, whether I should go on loving you if I were to find you had married me on false pretences? Well, that's just what you've done. You know my answer.'

Claude Meredith's face turned deadly white; he stood there before his wife like a beggar whose petition has been refused. The man's pride, as well as other things more fragile, seemed shivered into atoms. He tried to speak; but, for a while, his lips worked soundless. At last he said: 'You're quite determined?'

'Yes; either you speak, or I do. There are five days to do it in—the man will not come back till the time is

up. This is Monday ; you have till Friday night. If you've said nothing by then I shall take the matter into my own hands.'

'That's your last word ?'

'Yes.'

The answer came rather wearily. Evelyn got up, as she spoke, and went towards the door. Her figure was still very upright—almost rigidly so ; she turned, with her hand on the knob, and seemed about to wish him good-night. But she had miscalculated her powers, or had come to the very end of them, now that the need for self-control was over. Something rose suddenly in her throat, stifling her voice and warning her to go while there was yet time. She turned again towards the door, with the words unsaid, opened it hastily and went out, pulling it shut behind her. When she was in the hall, the sob, which could no longer be stifled, broke out, and the woman, who had been for hours as calm and cold and firm as any marble statue, went to her room, shaking with sobs and crying like any child.

But Meredith did not hear her ; to him this new aspect of icy immobility, under which he hardly recognised his once so loving and genial wife, continued unbroken. Otherwise, perhaps, he would have followed her ; and might have succeeded in securing in her weakness the promise of that which, in her strength, she had utterly refused to yield to him. Instead of making any such attempt he accepted the position as inevitable ; and, with characteristic want of perseverance, threw up the sponge and yielded himself to a current which seemed too strong to be resisted.

When his wife was out of the room, he threw himself into the chair where she had been sitting, leaned back against the cushions, and covered his face with his hands.

He sat there for quite a long time, like a man who has

been stunned, utterly unmindful of the pathetic attempts at comfort which little Warlock was making. No amount of tail-wagging, paw-lifting, or small whining noises seemed able to penetrate to his master's senses. Having done all that dog could to express his sympathy, the little fellow desisted, and subsided, with a long sigh, upon the rug. Suddenly Meredith moved his head and groaned aloud. His misery seemed to come upon him with overpowering force.

'All's up!' he murmured; 'no use fighting against it any longer, since *she's* turned against me. My God, who would have thought a woman like Evie could be so hard!'

He got up and walked the room, unable to sit quiet any longer. Yes, all must go—honour, position, house, lands, money, his wife's love, even—all for which he had sold his conscience. He regretted it now, regretted bitterly, not so much the sin as the sacrifice, which was proving worse than barren.

And now, what was to be done? It seemed to Meredith that he could not humble himself to the man he had wronged, and of whom he felt so unreasonably jealous. Anything rather than that! To stand as a criminal and a suppliant before Gilbert Clavering was more than he could face. What alternative remained? He could go away, certainly, and leave things to come out when his back was turned. But where could he go—he, an outlaw and a beggar? Even should he escape from justice, it seemed to Meredith that to begin life over again in some distant colony, knowing so well what roughing meant, was, after his experience of the ease and dignity of a landed proprietor, too distasteful to be thought of. But must his choice lie between these two evils—was there no third way out of the deep waters into which he had so unwarily plunged?

Yes ; one more alternative remained. Claude Meredith's flesh crept as it suggested itself to his mind, as all healthy flesh must creep before what is contrary to life. He stood still in the middle of the room to face the spectre that had arisen to tempt him. It was terrible of aspect, doubtless, but less terrible, on the whole, than those other candidates which had offered themselves to him for choice. If he elected this, it would, at least, be short shrift and quickly over for him. That was a real consideration to Meredith's mind. For what would life be to him, shorn of all that made it worth living ? To live on without his wife—to do the man justice he put her first—without money, without consideration, this seemed to him still worse than death. This way, at any rate, he would not live to feel his loss. A moment's violence, and then an end to everything ; for, like many another unhappy man, Claude Meredith did not reckon on what might lie beyond the grave. And he was unhappy, so wretched, indeed, that death in comparison with life, just then, seemed a merciful deliverer.

The wind roared and moaned around the house, rattling the bare branches of the trees against each other, and dying away with a sob that sounded almost human. The ivy-leaves tapped upon the window-panes. To the man, standing there alone and stripped of his disguises, it seemed as though Death were calling, calling on him with a voice which would not be denied. And yet he hesitated. Claude Meredith was always a waverer ; and who that lives and breathes would not have wavered before this tremendous choice ?

Well, he need not decide to-night ; there were yet four whole days before him in which to make up his mind. Who can tell what four days may not bring forth ? Yes, he would wait ; it would be folly to try to hasten events.

He *thought* he knew what his choice would be ; but Fate should decide it for him. Meantime, he would not stay at Hatherlea to endure the daily sight of his wife's condemning face. He would start for London, next morning, and spend the interval in that city of unconcern, where nobody cares what a stranger may be experiencing. If all was to be at an end for him by Friday evening, he would, at least, see what distraction, if not enjoyment, might be crammed into the time. Who was it that said 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die' ? Shakespeare ? No matter ; the saying seemed to Meredith full of the grimmest wisdom. He would put it to the test.

Having come to this conclusion, or what stood for such to this man of feeble purpose, Claude lit a cigar and flung himself back into his chair with a long sigh of relief. For, already, the torture was lessening ; he had the feeling of one who has ceased to struggle and is floating with the tide. He was so utterly tired out, mind and body, that a drowsiness of the senses was setting in ; and when, as midnight was striking through the silent house, he went upstairs to his dressing-room, and, after the hastiest of toilets, lay down in the bed he generally used when late in retiring, not even the desperateness of his position was able to keep him awake. An uneasy conscience and harassed mind are not, generally, supposed to provide the softest of pillows ; yet Claude Meredith, despite everything, slept like an innocent child.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TEMPEST-TOSSED

I am yet so weak
That half my thoughts go after thee ; but not
So weak that I desire to have it so.

JEAN INGELOW : *Afternoon at a Parsonage.*

And so we lay from ebb-tide, till the flow
Rose high enough to drive us from the reef.

JEAN INGELOW : *Brothers, and a Sermon.*

UNLIKE her husband, Evelyn spent a troubled night. In this disjointed world of ours, the burden of wrong-doing too often falls with heaviest weight, not on the guilty, but on the innocent. She was haunted by nightmares when she slept ; and, when she lay awake, the misery of present shame and suffering, and the dread of greater yet to come, pressed cruelly on heart and brain.

It was not till morning that real sleep came to her, bringing merciful unconsciousness ; and, so exhausted was every faculty, that she slept beyond her usual time, and was not downstairs till half-past nine. The idea of meeting her husband, after the interview of the night before, had been a source of dread to the wife. It was with feelings of relief, therefore, that she found that he had already breakfasted, and was no longer in the room.

Old Thomas handed her a little note, when he came with the coffee and eggs.

‘Master left this for you, ma’am,’ he said ; ‘he ordered out the carriage and drove to the station with his port-

manteau. Likely, he got a summons by post, this mornin' ? It must be somethin' vara pressin' to take him off just before the meetin'. But, mebbes, he'll be back ?'

Old Thomas's curiosity was evident. But his mistress put him off with a short 'Perhaps,' and waited to open her note till, less correctly than usual, he had effected his retirement from the room.

The envelope contained the briefest communication :

'Gone to London,' it ran. *'I trust to you not to act till my return. Do not fear that I shall fail you. You shall either see or hear from me by Friday evening.—C. M.'*

That was all. Evelyn tore up the paper and threw it contemptuously into the fire. She scorned the man who, even in this crisis of his fate, must still put off decisive action. Nor did she feel certain, notwithstanding his assurance, that he would not fail her at the last. He was drifting ; and who can prophesy, once we allow ourselves to do that, whither the current will carry us ? It is perilous in any circumstances to yield the will and trust to the chapter of accidents to decide for us. Yet, though Meredith's action increased his wife's contempt, it was, at least, a personal relief to her. To have been together, day by day, during the interval ; to have sat opposite to him at meals, and conversed on ordinary topics, with the one burning question utterly tabooed ; to have felt always that this thing was there unseen between them—was what the wife had been dreading as one of the worst parts of the painful ordeal she was bound to pass through. She was glad, therefore, that, since her husband could not make up his mind to confess his guilt at once, he, also, had recognised the position to be impossible, and had relieved her of his presence during the four days grace.

But there was something else that she dreaded even more, and that was a possible meeting with Gilbert Claver-

ing before the time should come for the inevitable disclosure. Evelyn was so honest and outspoken herself, that the very idea of concealment was dreadful to her. To be aware of the fraud which had been practised upon him by her husband, and to be compelled to meet him as though all was right between them, seemed to her a part almost impossible to play. For Evelyn Meredith, though she knew herself to be morally clear of any conscious participation in the terrible deception, felt herself to be practically involved. She had benefited by her husband's evil-doing; she was, even now, living in a house which was another's, and eating and drinking at his table, though he himself was totally unaware of the fact. No one could blame her, certainly; for she had been kept in the dark, just as much as Gilbert himself. Still, Evelyn felt that she was Claude's wife, and, as such, the burden of his guilt must fall upon her innocent shoulders. 'Husband and wife are one,' the informer had said to her, and she was only too keenly aware of the truth of his words. She, in her proud purity, felt the moral soil, so to speak, of the dishonourable conduct of the man to whom she was bound, and whose name she bore, and the consciousness made her bitterly ashamed. She longed intensely to go at once and cleanse her conscience of the 'perilous stuff' that weighed upon it, and regretted that she had promised to keep silence, even for a moment, on a subject which seemed to cry aloud for revelation; but, having promised, she would not go back upon her word.

So, she avoided a meeting with Gilbert as carefully as she could; the more so that, since those words of her husband's, a something had awakened and stirred within her heart which she dared not even look at. Only, when she thought of Gilbert Clavering, her one desire was to avoid him, at least till her husband had had time to confess what

would, as she told herself, put both him and her utterly beyond the pale of further consideration on the part of any honourable man. Friday evening came at last, and still Evelyn had seen no one; not even the Miss Williamsons had called. For the weather had been of the worst, and the two ladies both had colds. Gilbert, indeed, had been once at the house; but only to leave a book and an inquiry, as Thomas had told him his mistress was out. In point of fact, she had been in her room, and had seen both the coming and going of the visitor from her window; and not till he was safely off the premises had she ventured to do the little errand in the village for which she had been bound. That was on the day before—to-day, she had not been out at all; and she sadly congratulated herself, as she sat down by the fire in the morning-room for her solitary tea, that, in such a storm of wind as was then raging, no one, not even Gilbert Clavering, was likely to venture out.

But she reckoned without a certain factor, to which, indeed, she determinately shut her eyes. Her reckoning was, in consequence, incorrect. No sooner had she poured out her first cup of tea, than the very person whom she least desired to see walked into the room.

Luckily for Evelyn the lights had not yet been brought; only the bright little fire fought with the gathering darkness of the wild February evening; and, in its flickering shine, the woman's start and change of colour were not perceptible.

Gilbert Clavering came forward, in perfect unconsciousness of anything amiss, and greeted his hostess with the easy good-comradeship into which they had fallen since his return.

'I've come for a cup of tea,' he said, dropping into his usual chair by the fire, after shaking hands. 'Those dear, good ladies at the Cottage are having a female thimble-and-

needle-and-tea-fight, and I really couldn't face such an army of petticoats single-handed ; so I've come to you for refuge. I hope I'm not in the way ?'

He so evidently asked the question for form's sake, and seemed so comfortably confident of the answer, that Evelyn had not the heart to wound him with the truth ; so, feeling an utter hypocrite, she summoned a smile and said, as she poured out a cup of tea :

'You must have been in a bad way, indeed, to brave the weather for the sake of such a little thing ; but since you've come, I'll not refuse your small request. You don't take sugar, do you ?'—she absently poised a lump in the tongs.

'Don't I ? Well, I thought you knew my likes and dislikes by now, Evelyn !' Clavering said, with just a little ruffle in his tone. But he smiled all the same, as he took the cup from her hand. How strangely absent, she seemed, this afternoon, he thought, and watched her wonderingly while he sipped his tea. For she was looking into the fire, leaving her own cup to cool, unnoticed.

'I fear I'm in the way, after all,' he said, presently. 'You've a headache, perhaps ?'

Evelyn started back to attention.

'No—yes—that is, a slight one,' she answered vaguely. 'I didn't sleep very well last night.' She turned again to the leaping flames.

Gilbert Clavering watched her more closely. 'What is it ?' he wondered. 'Her face has a drawn, pinched look ; I hadn't noticed it before. I feel sure she isn't happy.' Then, aloud : 'You're all alone, this afternoon ? I suppose Meredith is away, speechifying ? Do you go to the meeting, this evening ?'

'The meeting ?'—for a moment Evelyn seemed quite to have forgotten the all-important fact—'oh, I remem-

ber,' she went on, with a sudden flush ; ' I don't think I shall be there. It depends on—I mean, I can't settle anything till Claude gets back. He's gone to London.'

'Gone to London ! That's sudden, isn't it ? I should have thought he couldn't be spared so soon before the election. This Hatherlea meeting is one of the last, you know.'

'Is it ? I'd forgotten.'

She got up suddenly, took the poker and stirred the fire. There was a note of hardly controlled weariness and distress in her voice, which struck painfully on Gilbert's ear. He put down his tea-cup with the intention of cutting short his visit and taking his leave when Evelyn should have turned round again. But, as it seemed, she was not in a hurry—she continued to belabour the merrily-burning logs with quite unnecessary energy ; and, even when she had restored the poker to its place, she did not immediately return to her seat. Gilbert, watching her, noticed that her shoulders were heaving ominously, and that her hand sought furtively for her pocket-handkerchief. Without a word he got up and walked to the window ; the shutters were not yet closed. The wind was dashing the drops of a heavy rain-scurd against the glass, and waving the branches of the elms across the dim grey sky ; it was not a cheery outlook. Notwithstanding the pattering rain and the souging wind, it seemed to Gilbert that he heard a choking sob. The sound caught at his heart, awakening a passion of sympathetic tenderness towards the woman who was to him still, what she had always been, the one woman in the world. He could no longer bear to leave her to suffer unnoticed. Turning hastily, he saw that she had returned to her chair and was lying back with her face hidden in her hands ; she seemed to have forgotten his presence. Longing to offer sympathy, yet hardly knowing

how far he might venture to meddle with such grief, Gilbert went back to the fire. 'I'm very sorry,' he said, gently; 'I ought not to have come. Is your head so very bad?—or— or is there anything else the matter?'

But Evelyn Meredith rallied herself. She sat up hastily and smiled bravely as she mopped her eyes: 'I thought you'd gone,' she said; 'don't mind me, please. It's very stupid, I know, but I *am* feeling a bit upset to-day. I shall be better in a minute. There—I'm better now!'

She put away her handkerchief with resolution, looking him straight in the face, as though to challenge any further display of sympathy.

Gilbert was nonplussed. Conventionality, with her forbidding face and stiff garments, had stepped between them. 'The brute!' he said to himself, the more savagely for the necessity of outward self-control. 'He's been unkind to her, that's plain. There's, evidently, been a quarrel.'

But though his inward kingdom was in revolt, Gilbert Clavering was lord over himself and held down the rebels resolutely. He sat still in his chair—waiting for the woman beside him to recover herself—with the utmost patience and apparent inattention. Little Warlock crept to his mistress's side and licked her hand; then he made opportune advances to Gilbert, which were warmly welcomed by the visitor. At last, seeing that Evelyn was sitting quiet, Gilbert Clavering got up.

'I'll say good-bye, now,' he said quietly. 'I hope your head will soon be all right.' He hesitated for a moment, then something infinitely pathetic in the wet, gold eyes impelled him to add, as he kept his hold on the hand he had taken to say good-bye, 'And, Evelyn, if there's anything I can do for you, you'll be sure to let me know, won't you? We're such very old friends, you see.'

He continued to hold her hand as he waited for her

answer. Evelyn Meredith tried to speak, but could not. With all her brave determination not to break down before this man, his delicate sympathy was almost more than she could bear. She tried again, but the tears were bursting out once more, and she hastily drew away her hand to cover them.

'Thank you,' she said at last ; 'thank you. You were always kind to me. But—but no one can help me—no one.' She put both hands before her face and fell back in her chair, shaking with the sobs she struggled against in vain.

Then, at last, Gilbert Clavering sent Conventionality to the right-about. Its presence was no longer endurable. Yet, though he dismissed Conventionality, he did not part with Self-restraint. Stooping over the sobbing woman, he laid one hand with calm steadying touch upon her shoulder, as an elder brother might have done.

'Hush, dear,' he said, and the tone corresponded with the touch ; 'don't distress yourself like that. Let us see if we cannot mend what is amiss. Won't you tell me what it is ?'

But this, Evelyn could not do.

'Don't, Gilbert, don't !' she said brokenly, fighting down her sobs. 'If you only knew, you wouldn't talk like that. There—please go away. I'm so sorry to have been such a fool ; but, indeed, I couldn't help it. We women are so good-for-nothing when we take to having headaches. I never used to be such a poor weak creature, did I ? But we never know what we may come to !'

She rose from her seat, smiling bravely in his face. Then Gilbert Clavering straightened himself and said good-bye, as though Conventionality had never been banished at all. And Evelyn Meredith returned his good-night in a voice which seemed quite to have recovered its steadiness.

'You'll very likely meet Claude on his way from the

station,' she said, acting her part with resolute determination. 'He intended to come by the 6.15 train.'

She stood on the hearth-rug, straight as a wand, looking after him, and the smile was still on her face as he turned for a last look before shutting the door. Not till he was well across the hall did Evelyn relax her self-control. As the front door closed behind him the smile died quite away, the firm lips trembled, and she let herself sink on her knees before the chair where he had sat with a moan of pain.

'Oh, Gilbert ! Gilbert !' she cried, burying her face in the cushions, 'why did I not know you sooner !'

It was a dark hour, truly, for Evelyn Meredith ; for now, at last, she was face to face with the truth concerning herself. She could no longer be blind to the fact that she had made the greatest mistake which a woman can make. And, as so often with such mistakes, it seemed irreparable. She had found it out too late.

Alas, for the mistakes of our lives ! How full of bitterness they are. How poignantly we are made to regret them. Committed in ignorance, ay, and, as we think at the time, for the best, they frequently end in bringing upon us more terrible retribution even than our sins. There is, however, this comfort for us to lay to heart ; a mistake, unlike a sin, has no moral soil about it. If for what is done ignorantly and innocently we must suffer, the suffering is merely temporal—it does not reach beyond this world. It is not punishment but discipline, which, if taken patiently and made the best of, may work in us such wisdom and experience as shall be a gain for all the rest of life. For, unlike ourselves, God does nothing blindly : He, at least, makes no mistakes ; and, if He allows us to make them, He can, like a wise and tender Father, take the spoilt mechanism from His children's hand, and make all work together for a higher good than could have come

about had those children been such pieces of perfection as to make no mistake at all.

Alas, for our mistakes ? Nay, perhaps we bunglers may live to say 'blessings on them.' For without them what prigs we should all become ! And who does not prefer an occasional blunderer to a perpetual prig ?

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DECISION OF THE UNDECIDED

Is his your moral of life ?

Such a web, simple and subtle,
Weave we on earth here in impotent strife,
Backwards and forwards each throwing his shuttle,
Death ending all with a knife ?

R. BROWNING : *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*.

This man decided not to live —

R. BROWNING : *A Grammarian's Funeral*.

CLAUDE MEREDITH sat over the fire in his bedroom in the London hotel where he was staying. It was the evening of Thursday, the third he had been in town, and the first on which he had come in before the small hours, when he had wakened a sleepy porter to open him the door, and had stumbled upstairs to bed hardly knowing where he was or what he was doing. For he had spent the three days, as he had intended, in the wildest dissipation, plunging into every excess that could give him a taste of distraction and forgetfulness.

Now, however, the days of grace were over, and the time had come when he could no longer drift, but must face the future and make up his mind how he should act. He had promised his wife that he would either see her or let her hear from him by Friday evening ; and, if he was to keep his word, he could no longer afford to put off the evil hour of decision. All through that time of heavy sleep and riotous living, the thought of this had lain at the back of his mind.

'I will leave it till Thursday night ; then I will decide. It will be time enough,' he had said to himself when the thought had become importunate. Now, the decision stood before him in menacing form, refusing to be dismissed. He must face the future and grapple with it, or the future would lay hold upon him. The way was blocked, there could be no escape. As he sat there with his head in his hands, the clocks of London, with their many iron tongues, struck out the midnight hour, rippling the air in solemn waves of sound which came to break, one by one, on the ear of the wretched man, till, when Big Ben gave the final word, he felt he could bear no more.

Your last day ! Time will not stay,
Say what you may ; Fate blocks the way.

So those iron voices seemed to din into his ears with a reiteration that was inexorable. There was to be no escape—his last hour was at hand ; for, all the time, Meredith had seemed to know that his choice would be death. He had not the courage to face confession, nor yet exile—a lonely exile in which he could have no companion. There was, he said to himself, no choice in the matter possible for him, except as to the manner and the place of his death.

How should he die ? He thought of the various ways of getting out of life, shivering and turning sick as each presented itself, a ghastly candidate for election. Poison, hanging, drowning—all came up in turn, only to be rejected. And then, being a sportsman and having served as a soldier, he thought of a bullet ; the idea was less repugnant to him than the rest—this, it seemed to him, would be the most manly way of putting an end to existence. If no better candidate offered, the bullet should have his casting vote. He would buy a revolver, next morning. And now, as to place. Should he meet death where he was—in London ? In this very room ?

THE DECISION OF THE UNDECIDED 327

He looked round, saw the commonplace hotel furniture, the dull wall-paper, the ugly carpet, and felt himself turn sick. No, if he must leave the world, he would, at least, have something more pleasant to look upon before his eyes closed for ever.

The vision of a green, quiet spot, shut in by trees and shrubs, where a tall Scots fir rose high above its fellows, came before his mind's eye. Should he go back to Hatherlea? He had always had a liking for the place—he had been proud of it. A longing came over him to hear once more the sound of the river, as it flowed beneath the high-backed bridge; to feel the air from the moors, blowing fresh upon his face; to see the steep roofs and gables of the old house which was his home. And then there was his wife. If he went back he might even steal a look at her—just one look without her knowledge—before he died. For he dared not face her scorn.

‘Evie! Evie!’

The thought of the gracious woman, who once had almost worshipped him, whom he still loved with a love which, not even his sins against her, and her outspoken condemnation of them and him, could in any way destroy, came to him with sudden clearness, bringing an overwhelming rush of tenderness.

He had sinned against her; yes, not only in the wild excesses of the last three days, but in other and less sensuous ways, he had, as it were, done despite to her trust and to her affection. He had deceived her from the beginning, though it was for her, in the first instance, that he had sold his soul and brought himself to this present pass. Yes, he must see her again. He would not, could not, go out of the world without one last look at the beloved face. Though she loved him no longer, though she had covered him with contempt, and withered him with righteous anger—aye,

though she was ready to betray his wrong-doing to the man he counted as his rival, Claude Meredith yet owned to himself that she was a woman beyond reproach. There was none to compare with her. She was righteous, if he was not. He would go out of the world with her face before his mind's eye ; he would die with her name on his lips, blessing her with his last breath.

Ah, what he had lost—what he had lost ! Meredith groaned aloud as he thought of all that was slipping from him. His brain seemed to turn, his heart to faint with longing, and every nerve to rise up, like some blood-sucking insect, to sting and to torment him. Yet, even then, he did not repent of what he had done. He had played for wife and house, for position and for fortune ; and, for a while, he had won them. He had possessed them all, and enjoyed them too, for full eight months. Though he had staked his soul to get them and had lost them again, together with the stakes, and must now pay down his life as well, in forfeit, Meredith said to himself that, if all were to do again he would not act otherwise. Regret for the evil stroke of Fortune, as he called it, which had caused his wrong-doing to be discovered, he had, indeed ; but, for the sin itself there was no real repentance. Otherwise, would he have acted as he had made up his mind to do ? Surely not. Those who truly repent them of their sins do not go on, straightway, to plan out other transgressions. Having made up his mind, Claude Meredith lay down and slept, as men whose hours are numbered so often sleep, in perfect unconsciousness. Perhaps, it is the absence of any hope, the elimination of all uncertainty as concerns the future, that induces this. The mind has nothing left to work on, and it rests, with the heavy torpor of a sleep which will so shortly pass into the sleep of death. It is the narcotic before the operation.

CHAPTER XXXV

A PLUNGE INTO THE ABYSS

Plunged forward through the sea of fog,
And all was silent as before—
All save the dripping rain.

LONGFELLOW: *Tales of a Wayside Inn.*

And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge down to hell.

R. BROWNING: *Abt Vogler.*

THE clock in the grey church tower at Hatherlea Bridge was striking the first quarter after six, next evening, as the train came into the station.

A goodly number of people came by it on account of the political meeting which was fixed to take place at Hatherlea, that evening, at half-past seven.

It was already nearly dark ; a wet, windy evening of the most unpleasant sort. The wind swept through the station and shrieked in the telegraph wires, and the rain fell in slanting, penetrating scuds, across the sodden hills. Everybody was in too much of a hurry to leave the station and get under shelter for the hour preceding the meeting, to have eyes for anybody else. Men pulled up the collars of their great-coats and mackintoshes, and went out into the road with their heads lowered to meet the weather. Umbrellas blocked the view very effectually, if view it could be called, which was all a damp, grey blur of trees and roofs, and fields, and sky, all run together as by a great brush charged with monochrome.

No one, therefore, noticed the tall man, clothed in long

dark driving-cloak from head to heel, with black felt hat pulled low over his eyes, who left the station almost the first among the passengers, and made his way down the muddy road to the wicket-gate which led, by a short-cut through the rookery, into the grounds of the Hall. It was Claude Meredith.

He did not stop to see to his portmanteau, or to ask whether or not a carriage had been sent for him, but hastened away as quickly as possible, avoiding recognition.

How wet and cold it was! In spite of the long coat that he wore, which the wind caught and blew about his legs, Meredith shivered as the chilly rain drove in his face and made its way from the brim of his felt hat down the back of his collar. The road was so running with water and deep in mud that his feet were soon thoroughly wet, and squelched dolefully at every step. Even at this last hour, the comfort-loving man regretted the thin shoes that he wore, and longed for the umbrella which he had forgotten to bring, with a feeling of fretful irritation. Strange that in the face of death such trifles should have power to move us. Yet so it is. Even a crease in the bedclothes will trouble the spirit of a dying man, and disturb his last moments.

He opened the wicket in the park-palings and passed into the rookery. It was more sheltered in here under the tall elms; but it was not less damp and uncomfortable. The moss was soaked to a wet sponge by the constant drip from the branches, which caught the rain and distilled it on to the ground. The wind moaned in the tree-tops, waving dismally to and fro against the dull grey sky from which the light was quickly disappearing. The rooks, uncomfortable likewise, uttered hoarse caws of protest, as they shook unsteadily upon their perches. They all seemed to have got sore throats, this evening. And Meredith thought

he soon would have one too, if——. But that 'if' caught him up quickly, and checked further prophecy in that direction.

Drip! drip! The drops fell with a dull thud upon the crown of his felt hat. Meredith wished they would not, they annoyed him most unaccountably. He did not want to think of drops either, just then. He was making his way towards that end of the Hall which contained the morning-room, where his wife usually sat when she was alone. One of the windows looked out upon the rookery, and he hoped that the shutters might still be unclosed so that he might get that last look at her for which he was pining. He knew Evelyn's love for the lingering daylight, and he was counting on this to give him his desire; but, if the trees *would* keep on dripping upon him like that, all the time he was standing outside, he thought that it would drive him mad. It would be so ridiculous, too, to feel cold water trickling down his back while he was taking his farewell look. Meredith swore at the raindrops, under his breath. He might have sworn, just as well, above it; for no one, except, perhaps, the rooks, could possibly have heard him; and, as rooks so often seem to swear among themselves, it would not have mattered if they had.

Meredith was close to the house now, he could see its dark bulk rising against the sky. Yes, he was right. There was a fire in the morning-room, and the shutters were unclosed; for he could see its light streaming redly into the greyness outside. It made a long ruddy track towards him along the sopping ground, striking upon the wet boles of the elms and the dripping leaves of the evergreens that formed a thicket beneath.

A fire! How comfortable it would be to stand beside a fire and warm his hands and feet, if it were but for a moment. This was his own fire, too, burning in his own

house. And yet he must stand, like a felon, outside in the chilly rain, nor dare to show himself to any within.

A felon ! Yes, that is what Evelyn thought him ; she would, very likely, call him so to his face, should he venture to present himself before her. It was hard, hard.

Claude Meredith was full of self-compassion, as men of his stamp usually are. They treat others badly. They make their own misfortunes ; and then they tell themselves how very ill-used they are.

How red the ground looked, where he was standing, with the reflection from the fire ; how crimson were the laurel-leaves and the trunks of the elms ! What was it they suggested ? Something unpleasant, for they made him shudder. Ah, yes, no wonder ; they brought back the vision of a battlefield—it was as though each thing that the firelight touched were splashed and dripping with blood.

Meredith turned sick at the thought, and yet he had made up his mind to do something shortly which would make the fancy a reality. But not here ; no, this was too near the house. All day he had been haunted by the vision of that old Scots fir, standing by itself among a bed of heather and rhododendrons, not far from where the wall of the park skirted the river. And then he saw himself, also, making ready to die.

Well, that would come, presently. He had first to take that last long look at the woman he loved. He could not die without it.

It did not once enter Meredith's mind, given the fire and the open shutters, that Evelyn might not be in the room—he felt sure he should see her, once he were near enough. The only fear which troubled him was lest she should see him. He advanced with caution, making a *détour* round the shrubs so as to approach the window from one side.

As he neared it the church clock struck the half-hour, a cracked, rather dismal clang, as though its bell, also, were affected by the prevailing damp and dreariness. Yet, how familiar ! How reminiscent of many pleasant things ! It brought to Meredith's ear the hum of bees in summer sunshine ; he seemed to smell the scent of roses, heavy with dew, as he waited for Evelyn by the Rectory wall. Ah, well, things were very different now ; he had had his day. He should only hear that old clock strike once more ; for he had made up his mind that seven o'clock was to be his hour—then all would be over with him ; for Meredith would not think of a Hereafter.

He was quite close to the window now. The ivy-leaves that grew up the walls of the house brushed his cheek with their five wet fingers as he advanced his head cautiously to the edge of the frame. He looked in. Yes, Evelyn was there ; she was sitting in the full flood of fire-shine which flickered round her tawny hair and lit up the brown of her cloth dress. But he could not see her face ; it was buried in the cushions of her chair. Her body was turned shoulder outward ; she seemed to be sobbing, for he saw the shoulder heave.

But Evelyn was not alone ; and the sight of her companion took away all pity for the weeping woman from the heart of the man who was her husband. His head seemed to burn like fire and his heart to fill with rage and bitterness, as, at the same instant, his eyes rested on the tall figure, and square, dark face of Gilbert Clavering.

He was bending over Evelyn ; one hand lay upon her shoulder. He seemed to be comforting her, for his face was full of tender pity, and though Meredith could hear no words, he could see by the motion of the lips that Gilbert was speaking.

Comforting her ! What right had he to do that

when Evelyn was not *his* wife but that of this poor condemned man who must stand, perforce, outside and look on while another took his place—and that other the very man who was to profit by his, Meredith's, loss ?

The very idea was maddening. Yet what could Claude do ? To have followed his first impulse and rushed between them would, as a moment's reflection showed him, have led to the most unpleasant of scenes and brought about the very consequences he had determined to avoid. And, after all, what did it matter ? In less than half an hour he would himself be a dead man. His wife would then be free to give herself to whom she would.

If Gilbert Clavering were able to comfort her for her disappointment about himself, to make up to her for the bad bargain she had made in her first marriage, why should he, Meredith, spoil the chances for her ? Evelyn had suffered enough already ; she would suffer still more before all was over. Let her take what compensation she could.

Half cynically, half sorrowfully, Claude Meredith turned away from the lighted window into the wet and chilly darkness. He cared now still less than before how soon he was done with life. If anything had been wanting to keep him to his purpose, his wife, he reflected, had supplied the motive. There was nothing left to bind him to the world.

The church clock struck the quarter to seven as he came out of the shrubbery and found himself in the long avenue between the double rows of stately elms whose tops were swaying with ceaseless vibration against the sky. The light had all but left it now ; a star or two shone out like a pin-prick in the scudding clouds ; the rain had nearly ceased.

Claude Meredith walked on rapidly till he came within a stone's throw of the entrance gates. Then, at a gap which a former storm had made among the elms to the

left of the drive, he left the avenue and plunged into the thick undergrowth of evergreens and heather.

Yes, here was the place he had had in his mind when he planned the final scene. There was just sufficient light remaining by which to see the dark umbrella-like top of the great Scots fir, lifting itself high above the surrounding trees into the lowering sky. Claude Meredith plunged through the heather, and stood with his back against the rough red pillar of the trunk. Then he opened his cloak, took the revolver from his breast pocket, and, holding it in his hand, stood there waiting.

'When the clock strikes seven, I will fire,' he said to himself.

As he waited he could hear the ceaseless rush of the river, coming down from the hills in spate, and chafing hoarsely against the piers of the high-backed bridge. The equally ceaseless sigh of the wind in the branches came, like the sound of an aerial river, from above. Strange to think that in a few minutes more his ears would be deaf to every sound.

What was this : the sound of voices from the bridge ? Ah, yes ; he remembered, now, what, before, he had quite forgotten : this was the night of the Hatherlea Bridge political meeting, at which he himself was to have spoken. The people were going to it, expecting him to appear and address them as their candidate. There was something like grim humour in the idea which made Meredith's lips curl. Well, they would have to expect him in vain ; they would have to choose another candidate ; for, by the hour the meeting was timed to begin, he, Claude Meredith, Squire of Hatherlea, would be dead. Would they send Gilbert Clavering to Parliament in his place ? Meredith wondered. Would he get that honour as well as all the other desirable things he himself had had ? Likely enough.

Meredith ground his teeth savagely as the thought passed through his mind. But, after all, what matter? By that time he himself would no longer be present to care.

Claude listened impatiently to the voices; he wanted them to cease and the silence to return. He could not, he thought, die in peace while that sound of human life was going on. Stillness again. He drew a deep breath. He had feared the clock might strike before the men were over the bridge. Now he was ready for the signal.

He put his revolver against his breast and waited.

Would that old crack-voiced clock never begin to strike? Surely, it must be much more than half an hour since he had stood outside the window and looked his last upon the woman who had been his wife? *Had* been? Well, the past tense would be the correct one in another moment.

Ah, there it was! The signal for which he was waiting was pealing out through the darkness at last.

How solemnly the strokes struck upon the air—awful as those of a passing-bell!

What did people generally do for a man about to die?

'God have mercy on his soul!' Ay, those were the words of commendation.

Should he say them for himself? Meredith felt a strong inclination to do so. But, did not such a prayer imply a hereafter? If so, what of himself? Whither was he hurrying, with all his sins upon him?

All the while the crack-voiced clock was striking slow and solemnly—

'*One—Two—Three—Four—Five—*'

Well, it was too late now to think of what might be in store for him; too late now to change his mind.

'*Six—*' One more stroke, and then all would be over. Claude Meredith felt the cold sweat break out all over his body; he trembled in every limb. But the die was cast.

The mind, which had been made up with such difficulty, held firm. There was no more drifting to and fro. The rapids swept him along—the falls were near. Another moment and he would be over.

'Seven!'

As the last stroke rippled away upon the rushing river of Time, another sound, sharp and sudden, awoke the echoes, startling the rooks from their roosting-places in the elms, and sending them, cawing hoarsely, into the air.

Claude Meredith reeled away from the old Scots fir, and fell heavily with his face upon the wet heather at its foot. He had taken the plunge at last.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AFTERWARDS

My life's best treasure have I spent in vain,
And death and hell are now my only gain.
I totter on a dark chasm's dreadful brink,
Hell's jaws are yawning for me, and I sink :
Yet, since none ever from Thee didst Thou cast,
I stretch my hands to Thee, Lord, hold them fast.

ABP. TRENCH : *The Monk and the Sinner.*

GILBERT CLAVERING had not left her very long when Evelyn Meredith pulled herself together, got up from her chair, and walked to the window which looked upon the rookery. She stood there for some moments, looking out, with her back turned upon the room. She turned her back resolutely upon other things at the same time. For Evelyn was not the woman to give way for long to vain regrets, or to enervate herself by dwelling on what might have been, in such a crisis as this. There were things ahead which must be faced ; what lay behind was much better left unexamined, at least, so far as the present was concerned.

The train which ran in connection with the North express must have come in by now. If her husband were true to his compact and were returning by it, he should be here immediately. She had sent the carriage to the station; it ought already to be back.

As the thought passed through Mrs. Meredith's mind, she heard the trot of horses' hoofs and the crunch of wheels upon the gravel. The carriage must be quite close, or she

could not have caught the sounds above the moaning of the wind in the trees.

She held her breath, and stood, with beating heart and eyes fixed upon the branches which waved up and down, back and forward, like long arms with outspread fingers, against the rapidly darkening sky. If Claude were in the carriage, in another moment she would have to meet him face to face. She turned sick at the thought of that meeting, with a feeling of repulsion.

But no ; the wheels had turned up the road towards the stable-yard. Then, either he was walking, or he had not come ; Evelyn was inclined to think the latter. It was only what she had expected. Claude was afraid to meet his fate like a man ; he was leaving her, a woman, to meet it for him.

Her lip curled with the scorn which followed on the thought. How differently Gilbert Clavering would have acted under the circumstances ! But then, Gilbert could never have stood in such a position at all.

Evelyn pulled herself up and turned resolutely from the window. Her mind had involuntarily called up the images of the two men in contrast. She had found herself comparing them again, as she had done before—it was becoming only too natural ; yet such comparisons were not to be permitted—she had had her choice between them, and had chosen Claude. If she had chosen wrongly, she was still his wife. There was no blinking that fact—and Evelyn was far too upright and honest a woman to try to blink it ; but the feeling of sick repulsion grew on her, nevertheless. She caught herself wondering, in a dull sort of fashion, whether she could bring herself to go on living with this man after the discoveries which she had made.

Old Thomas brought in the lights, apologising for delay. He had been down in the village, he said, to see

that all arrangements were complete for the evening's meeting. For Thomas was a keen politician and convinced Conservative ; and, though he did not altogether feel certain that his master was in all points calculated to uphold that sacred cause, yet he *was* the candidate, and, as such, must be loyally supported.

Thomas, indeed, was full of anxieties and excitement ; for had not the carriage just returned from the station empty ? There was only one other train from Newcastle before the meeting began ; if his master did not return by that what a terribly awkward fix the Unionists of the division would be in—especially Thomas himself, who felt, as it were, responsible for his master.

He shared some of these anxieties discreetly with his mistress, as he closed the shutters and brushed up the hearth. 'Had she any news from Mr. Meredith ?' he ventured to ask. But Evelyn put him off. It was not the political meeting which loomed so largely in her mind's eye, but something far more personal. If the people of Hatherlea Bridge and district knew what she knew about their candidate, he would, she was well aware, be hissed from the platform before he could speak a word. The meeting, therefore, was of no consequence whatever, so far as he was concerned.

'John waited a good while at the station, ma'am,' remarked Thomas, loth to give up the chance of information ; 'he thought, mebbes, the maister might hev missed his train and talegraphed ; but there was no worrd cam'.'

'Well, Thomas, he may still arrive by the next,' answered Evelyn, with a feeling of impatience she found it hard to conceal. 'You can go to the meeting if you like, and tell them he's been detained. I sha'n't want you at dinner, Florence can bring me something in here on a tray ; for I suppose Francis will want to go to the meeting too.'

‘He’s off arlready,’ remarked the old butler ; ‘young chaps, like him, disn’t arlways wait tor see if they’re wanted. Not but what this is a big occasion, an’ brings wi’t a big excuse ; sae Ah’ll joost step doon mesel’ an’ dae my best for the maister. But it’s a peety he’s set himsel’ late, on this of arl neits in the year.’

Thomas retired, full of bustle and importance, to follow in the wake of his subordinate. He felt as though he were ambassador extraordinary, empowered to mediate between his absent master and an impatient public. The house seemed very still when he was gone ; the sounds of the weather outside grew yet more eerie. Evelyn felt glad of the presence of even little Warlock, who slept quietly upon the rug. She lay back in her chair, and put her hand to her forehead ; it was throbbing badly. She felt so strangely tired—she, the strong, healthy Evelyn Hesketh, whom nothing ever seemed to weary. Now, even to sit and think was a toil. Suddenly she heard the house door bang, a hasty foot crossed the hall, and the door of the morning-room opened. It must be her husband, come at last.

Evelyn’s heart gave a frightened leap. She took her hand from her eyes and looked up. It was not Meredith, however, who stood before her, but Gilbert Clavering. His face and hair were wet and shiny with rain-drops, which he had been at no pains to wipe off. There was an awed expression, mingled with infinite compassion, in his eyes.

‘Evelyn,’ he said, in a voice which was, evidently, under a strong curb, ‘can you bear bad news ?’

‘What is it ?’ she gasped, half rising from her chair. ‘Claude ?’

‘Yes ; there’s been some sort of accident. I found him in the park, just now, lying unconscious under the old Scots fir—they’re bringing him in. My poor girl, don’t look so scared ; he’s not dead.’

Evelyn, by this, had got quite up out of her chair ; she was standing, with one hand leaning against the jambs of the marble chimney-piece. Every scrap of colour had gone out of her cheeks and lips, and her eyes had a look of wild question and appeal.

‘Murdered ?’ she whispered. ‘Was it that—that man ?’

‘What man ? Try to be strong, Evie dear.’ Gilbert slipped his arm for a moment around the girl’s swaying form ; but, not even at that instant, though the touch of her body, the sight of her weakness, thrilled him, did he forget that she was another man’s wife. ‘No, I don’t think it’s been murder,’ he went on, as he helped her back into her chair. ‘There are no signs of anything of that sort. He seems to have shot himself—by mistake.’ He added the last words hastily, as he saw the look of horror in Evelyn’s eyes.

‘By mistake ? Oh, I hope so ! If not, if he *meant* it, and if he dies, it is I who have killed him, Gilbert. Think of that !’

‘*You*, Evie ? Oh, surely, not ! You mustn’t think of such things, dear. Ah, here’s your supper-tray. Your mistress has had bad news, Florence,’ he said, turning to the maid. ‘Mr. Meredith has had an accident—they’re bringing him in ; you had better go and see that everything’s ready upstairs.’ Then, as the maid hastily left the room, he poured out a glass of wine, kneeled down by the side of the nearly fainting woman, and held it to her lips. ‘Drink this, Evelyn,’ he said, with firm kindness, as, with the other hand, he raised her a little. ‘You’ll have need of all your strength, my poor girl. There ! that’s better. I hear them coming into the hall. Now finish this, and when we’ve got him into bed, I’ll come for you. Dr. Woodward has been sent for.’

Seeing that Evelyn was able to hold the wineglass, and

that the colour was returning to her lips, Clavering rose to his feet, and left the room, closing the door gently behind him. Meeting Florence hovering outside, he sent her to her mistress. Then he met the men who were bearing their ghastly burden across the hall, and went before them up the stairs. In about half an hour, he returned. He found Evelyn sitting on the hearth-rug with little Warlock's silky head upon her knee. She was absently stroking his soft ears, while the dog had laid one paw, as a human being might have laid a hand, upon her other wrist. The contact seemed to bring a sort of soothing and comfort to the much-tired woman ; for there are times when an animal's dumb sympathy is better for us than the most eloquent words of a fellow-man. The golden eyes, which seemed made for the sunshine, as Gilbert Clavering had often thought, were fixed upon the door ; there was a strained, hard look in them, as though they had suddenly become opaque, and had lost the power to move and melt.

Evelyn got up as Clavering entered, and stood waiting, with the dog watching her all the time on the rug at her feet.

'Come,' Gilbert said, 'we have made him as comfortable as we can. Dr. Woodward has dressed the wounds and wired for Dr. Hedley from Newcastle. Your husband is quite insensible, and will probably remain so for some time ; so you will not disturb him, if you go into the room. Still—if you would rather not go——?' He added the words questioningly, as he saw the shiver which ran through Evelyn's body. But she pulled herself instantly together.

'Of course I'll go,' she said coldly ; 'he is my husband. My place is by his side.'

Gilbert Clavering opened the door for her to pass him ; he had the sensation of being suddenly put on one side. Without another word he followed her up the stairs.

Claude Meredith had been laid on the bed in his dressing-room. He lay back on the pillow, with bandaged head and eyes fast closed ; his face was ghastly white, and the pallor, combined with the bandages of white linen, gave him all the appearance of a dead man.

Dr. Woodward sat beside him, with a hand upon his patient's pulse. He looked up hastily, with a warning gesture, as Evelyn came in. He seemed to fear some outburst of emotion ; but she was perfectly quiet and composed. Some change seemed to have passed over her in the room downstairs, steadying and strengthening her nerves.

'I've come to sit by my husband, Dr. Woodward,' she said, without a tremble in her voice ; 'you'll need some one to watch him to-night—I will do it myself.'

'But—are you sure you are able, Mrs. Meredith ?' asked the old man, looking keenly at the pale face of the woman whom he had known from childhood. 'I'll stay with you till the morning ; but I'll have to leave him awhile, if possible, at 4 A.M.—there'll be no change till long after that, as I think. You're sure you're not undertaking more than you have strength for ?' He took her hand in his, as he spoke. It was perfectly firm and cool, nor could he detect a tremble about the close-shut mouth.

'Yes, I'm quite able,' she said, as she took the chair the doctor had vacated for her ; 'it is my duty and my right. I am his wife.'

This was a self-evident fact which neither of the two men present could contradict. No more was said. Gilbert Clavering left the room, closing the door gently behind him. The doctor took his seat at the bed-foot, and the watch began.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE NIGHT WATCHES

Only a driving wreck,
 And the pale master on his spar-strewn deck
 With anguish'd face and flying hair
 Grasping the rudder hard,
 Still bent to make some port he knows not where.

MATTHEW ARNOLD: *A Summer's Night*.

HALF-FAST three chimed out from the church tower across the river. The wind, which still blew the branches of the elms across a background of inky sky, came from that direction, and carried the sounds of the passing hours to the ears of the watchers.

Dr. Woodward got up. 'No change yet,' he said, in a low-pitched voice. 'I think I may safely leave you with him for a while; I've a serious case in the village which should be seen to. But, perhaps, I'd better call up one of the servants first? It's trying for you to watch alone.'

But Evelyn, with a gesture, put the idea aside. 'No,' she said quietly, 'I want no one; I'd rather be alone.'

'Dr. Hedley from Newcastle can't be here till nine o'clock, at soonest,' went on the family doctor, buttoning up his coat; 'if there should be any change before that—it is possible the patient may wander a little, though I don't anticipate it at present—send for me. If he *should* be restless, I'll leave some medicine ready mixed; give him a dose of it. You're sure you can manage?' He looked

keenly and kindly at the young wife. She returned his look with one of steady gravity.

‘Perfectly sure,’ she said ; yet, when the old doctor was gone, a quiver of pain passed over the face so quiet up to then, that seemed to belie her words. She wrung her hands together. ‘I wish I could tell what was best to do,’ she said to herself. This was a question which Evelyn had been debating silently with herself all through that night’s watch. Under her quiet outward seeming, heart and brain were working with painful activity ; for she was keenly alive to the fact that, though her husband had put it out of his own power to make confession, it must still be made by someone. She alone knew his secret, with the exception of the adventurer, Captain Ford. If she did not take measures to inform Gilbert Clavering of it by next morning, Ford would do so. Then what would Gilbert think—of her, as well as of her husband ? For she would have to confess, when it came to the point, that she had known for some time of the fraud which had been practised. He would think, most certainly, that she was art and part in it—all his faith in, and good opinion of, her would be gone ; Evelyn could not bear to think of that. Besides, if Ford were left to make the disclosure, he might make the story yet blacker than it actually was. A man like that would hardly be likely to recommend another to mercy. And, yet, how could she, Evelyn Meredith, tell him, Gilbert Clavering ? It was not only that she must brand her own husband with a crime punishable by law, but the man to whom she must accuse him stood in a peculiar relation to herself. The hot colour came into her pale face, and she covered her aching eyes with her hands, as she recalled the construction her husband had put upon the matter, and reflected that, in the light of after

discoveries made by herself in her own heart, his words were not altogether unfounded. What would the world say ? Would it not put the same construction upon her actions ? Was it likely to be more charitable to her than her own husband had been ? And Gilbert himself—might not even he set her down in his own mind as a shameless woman—a woman who had made a mistake, had found it out too late, and was trying to ingratiate herself with the man she had rejected by informing against the one whom she had accepted ? No ; she *could* not tell him ! And yet she seemed to have no choice but to do so. It was maddening—maddening ; and there was no one to whom she could turn for help.

Was there really no one ? Evelyn raised her head a little as the idea passed through her mind that, perhaps, she might consult somebody—might even get that somebody to speak for her. But who ? Who was there she dared trust with a matter so secret and delicate ? She thought of her father, only to dismiss him instantly ; no, the Canon was not a man to manage what needed both tact and diplomacy. Besides, he could never keep it to himself ; for the Canon, like most married men, could keep nothing from his wife ; though, of course, had such a thing been hinted to him, he would have been most righteously indignant. And yet he was a priest, and priests, as Evelyn knew, may, at any time, be entrusted with confessions. It, really, was fortunate, under the circumstances, that everybody knew the Canon's horror of this mode of relieving an over-burdened soul, or the consequences might have been disastrous. And then, all of a sudden, the Canon's daughter thought of another man who was, also, a priest, and who, moreover, believed in his priestly powers to the scandal of those of his own order who, like her father, were afraid to believe in them. Father Allison would not only hear a confession, but would

as soon die as divulge it. She would send for Father Allison and tell him. She thought she could tell him quite easily—could put herself into his hands with the utmost confidence ; for Evelyn knew the good priest of Lavingham sufficiently well to feel certain that her father's prejudices concerning him were utterly unfounded. Yes ; she would write a note to Father Allison, slip with it into the hall and lay it on the slab, where Thomas would find it and send it off with any other notes which were left there, first thing next morning.

Very quietly she stole through the room, opened the door that led into her own bedroom, found her writing materials and returned to her husband's side. He was still lying as quietly as ever. But who could tell how much longer he might remain so ? Dr. Woodward had hinted at a possibility of delirium. Supposing him to fall into wandering talk, as Evelyn believed most delirious persons did, might he not betray his own secret to anyone who happened to be present ? But he should not do that if she could help it, the wife said to herself ; she would insist on being his only nurse. Poor girl, she knew but little of illness when she made such a rash resolve, or how it would overtax her powers.

Having written the few words necessary to summon Father Allison, Evelyn folded the paper, enclosed it in an envelope, which she addressed, then, with another look at her husband, she stole with it in her hand from the room.

The staircase was in almost total darkness. Only the first wan light of the wintry dawn struggled through the wet window-panes, making ghostly reflections on the old oak pannelling—shadows, like strange formless shapes, lurked in the corners and windings of the stair.

Evelyn shivered, with eeriness still more than chill, as she glided silently down. Had she but known it, in her

white dressing-gown, and with her pale face and wide-open, sorrow-filled eyes, she was more like a ghost herself than any of the shadows and dim effects of growing light which gave her the shivers.

In the hall it was still more creepy ; for here the suits of armour, the weapons and antlers and stuffed animals looked so like watchers, ready, at any moment, to take life and spring upon her, that, though Evelyn Meredith had all her life despised those who yielded to foolish fancies, she felt ready to cry out on the smallest provocation. For when misfortune has gripped the nerves the strongest and most sensible is apt to feel a sense of insecurity, and to realise the nearness of the unseen world. She crossed the marble-paved floor, her slippers tapping upon it as she went, and was just about to lay her note upon the marble slab in front of the tall brass-faced clock, ticking solemnly opposite the staircase, when a slight rustle made her pause and set her heart beating wildly.

A dark figure was rearing itself up upon the old oak settle, in the corner to the left, which stood in front of one of the oldest suits of armour and was halfshaded from view by a tall vase full of pampas grass.

It was all Evelyn could do to hold in a cry. She dropped her letter, with a violent start, and stood there, with hands pressed against her breast, unable to move.

‘ Evelyn ! ’ said a voice, ‘ you here ! Can I do anything ? ’

The blood in Evelyn’s veins, which had run so cold a moment before, suddenly grew so hot that she tingled from head to foot. For the ‘ ghost ’ was none other than Gilbert Clavering. He came forward, noticed the letter which had fallen, address downwards, upon a black marble slab in the paved floor at Evelyn’s feet, and picked it up.

‘ It’s only—I thought——’ The girl’s heart was

beating so fast that speech was difficult. 'You frightened me, you see,' she added, more steadily, with a faint smile; 'I thought you'd gone long ago.'

'No, I've been here all night. I thought you might possibly want something, and that I would be within call. Dr. Woodward said you utterly refused to have any of the servants with you. What is it? Can I post that letter?'

He spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone, which Evelyn found very soothing. She grew more at her ease.

'Thank you,' she said, 'it's not for the post; it's for Father Allison, at Lavingham. Thomas will send one of the grooms with it when the household is astir; I want him to get it as soon as possible.'

'Then I'll take it myself.'

Evelyn was grateful for the simple statement, and for the delicate tact which avoided question in any shape, even by a look.

'No, don't do that,' she said; 'it's *very* good of you, Gilbert; but there's no such hurry. It's still raining. One of the grooms can ride over. It's rather important, you see, or I'd have waited till Thomas was up.'

She said the last words in a hesitating, deprecating fashion, and with a curious appeal in her eyes which set Gilbert wondering what her business with Father Allison could be. But he still refrained from remark.

'Well, I'll see Mr. Allison gets it as soon as possible, anyhow,' he said; 'and I'll be here till the servants are up, in case anything is wanted. How is he?'

'No change'—the woman's voice had a ring of hopelessness about it that went to Gilbert's heart. He watched her sadly, as she turned away with a little outward gesture of the hand which had in it something of dull despair, and went slowly up the staircase in the cold light of the growing dawn.

How quickly and lightly she used to spring up those stairs, Gilbert remembered, only a year ago ! And he thought with bitter resentment of the man who, he felt sure, had broken the spring of brightness in the heart of this woman, who was all the world to him. For it was not by his death (if he was to die) but still more by his life, as Gilbert reflected, that Meredith had broken his wife's heart. *What* was it ? he wondered ; what had wrought this change in the once so bright and happy girl ? That she had loved Meredith, at one time, and had rejoiced in having won him, he felt sure enough ; he would never have given up his own chance of winning her, but for that. Was it only that Meredith, after marriage, had, like many another husband, ceased to think it worth while to please his wife ? Or was there something more definitely amiss ? Had she discovered something about him which had destroyed her love with her respect ? Gilbert Clavering was well aware that very little was known of Claude Meredith's former life—he had wondered that Canon Hesketh had so easily consented to give him his daughter ; but then, Meredith was rich, and money covers a multitude of shortcomings, even in the eyes of a canon of the Church. And then, this attempted suicide—for that it *was* suicide Gilbert had little doubt—what had driven an easy-going man, like Claude Meredith, with all, apparently, that life could give him, to such a desperate course ?

There was a mystery somewhere, of that there seemed no doubt ; but to that mystery, Gilbert Clavering, whom, of all men in the world, it interested most, was quite without a clue. He could only wonder and pity intensely the woman who was involved in it, as he went back to his settle, lay down, and drew the rug over him, to continue his self-imposed watch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A CONFESSION

PARISH PRIEST. He will restore
The peace that filled thy heart before,
And pardon thine iniquity !

LONGFELLOW: *The Golden Legend.*

‘PEACE be to this house !’

Evelyn Meredith rose quickly from her husband’s bedside as the sound of the priestly greeting fell upon her ears. She turned towards the door, to see Father Allison’s tall, spare figure, in the black cassock which he usually wore, coming quietly across the threshold with uplifted hand.

She had given orders that he was to be brought upstairs immediately on arrival. But, wearied out with strain of mind and body, she had fallen into a half-dozing state, as she sat watching her unconscious husband, and had not heard the light tap upon the door which preceded her visitor’s entrance.

Seeing that his mistress was now on the alert, old Thomas, who had brought Father Allison up, shut the door behind him and went downstairs.

‘Whatever can she want wi’ t’ priest o’ Lavingham ?’ wondered the old man, who was quite as curious about family matters as most old servants are. And no wonder, for they consider themselves of the family, and are more interested in its concerns than ‘the fam’ly’ itself.

‘It wad ha’ been mair nat’rel-like to send for her ain feyther,’ went on the butler. ‘He’s a priest an’ arl—a

Canon, onyway—if it's a minister she wants. But it's a queer thing how folks sends for yon chap in a dressing-gown when they're in trouble. What is't they see in him? I wonder. He disn't look as though he gat enough meat to keep him going; his hoosekeeper maun be a poor one. Well, well, there's nowt sae queer as folk!'

With which very true and profound reflection on human nature, old Thomas went to his breakfast in the servants' hall; for he, at any rate, never allowed anything, however serious, to interfere with 'his meat,' a term which covers considerably more than flesh alone in the North Countrie.

Father Allison stood, for a moment, looking from Mrs. Meredith, who seemed suddenly stricken with dumbness, to the unconscious figure on the bed. He, too, was somewhat puzzled concerning the reason of his summons to the Hall—a stronghold, as he had always considered it, of a parish whose spiritual ruler held him as 'a traitor to his Church.'

Allison, indeed, had hesitated about obeying a call which might put him into the position of an intruder. For clergymen, as a rule, are as particular about professional etiquette as doctors themselves. That he had decided to come was due as much to Father Allison's individual contempt of mere etiquette, where any real good is to be done, as to the urgent nature of the summons he had received. Naturally enough he had guessed that the sick man had a confession to make; for, like others in the neighbourhood, the whisper of suicide had reached his ears. And to find the patient lying utterly unconscious and incapable of making any such revelation was not a little perplexing. After uttering the usual greeting, therefore, Father Allison paused uncertain, waiting to hear what further was required of him.

He had not to wait long. After the first moment of

paralyzing nervousness, consequent on the near approach of a much-dreaded interview, Evelyn Meredith pulled herself together. Father Allison's quiet manner, and the look of grave kindness on his thin, close-shaven face, gave her a feeling of something like confidence ; she felt that she could trust this silent man.

'Mr. Allison,' she said, panting a little with nervousness, in spite of her confidence, 'I've something to say to you. I'm in need of advice and help. There seemed no one else to turn to. Will you come in here ?'

She opened the door of the adjoining room, and, leaving it open, so that she might hear any sound from the patient, she went in, followed by the priest.

But, once inside, she began again to tremble and blanch, and seemed unable to begin.

'What is it, Mrs. Meredith ?' asked Father Allison in his deep, quiet voice—'the Gregorian tones' of his college days—'You'll let me help you if I can ; don't be afraid ! Is it'—he seemed trying to help her out—'is it a confession ?'

He said the word—the word which was so full of mysterious horror to her own father—in a most matter-of-fact way, Evelyn thought. But, such is the force of habit, that she felt herself ready to repudiate the idea.

'No, no !' she said hastily, 'not that ; at least—well, I suppose it *is* a sort of confession ; but it's not my own—it's—my husband's.'

Father Allison looked puzzled—a vicarious confession was certainly as unusual as it was irregular. But, seeing the intense earnestness in Mrs. Meredith's eyes, and guessing at once the urgency of the occasion which was driving her to make the disclosure, he put aside all consideration of mere formalities, and prepared to adapt himself to circumstances, and to the needs of the woman before him.

‘And—and,’ she said hurriedly, ‘I want your advice—your help. I haven’t known *what* to do!’ A sob came up into her throat; her lips quivered, and her eyes had in them a hunted look.

Father Allison laid a hand, in fatherly fashion, upon the drooping head.

‘My daughter,’ he said—‘I may call you that, may I not? Speak to me as you would speak to Him Whom I represent; do not be afraid.’

Evelyn looked up into the strong, gaunt face, into the penetrating, yet kindly eyes, and was, suddenly, calmed and strengthened. With broken words and trembling voice, certainly, yet without any reserve or incoherence, she told her story, while Father Allison listened gravely, without any signs of horror upon his face. It might have been the most ordinary story in the world he was hearing, to judge by his manner and expression.

‘And now,’ said Meredith’s wife in conclusion, ‘I want to know what had better be done. You see the urgency of the matter. Will you tell Mr. Clavering?’

‘Certainly, I will, my daughter’ (that term ‘my daughter’ sounded comforting in Evelyn’s ears); ‘he’s downstairs now—nay, don’t be afraid, Gilbert Clavering will not be hard upon that poor fellow, I can safely promise you that, I think. He has been through deep waters himself. Shall I go to him at once? Then I’ll come back and tell you. God be with you, meanwhile.’

He went on his errand, and Evelyn, going back to her husband’s bedside, threw herself back in the chair, and, bowing her face in her hands, waited.

Ah, these waiting-times in the great crises of life, how sorely they try our poor humanity! To sit quiet and possess the soul in patience, when life and death, or what is as life and death to us, are hanging in the balance,

requires a high standard of self-surrender and trust in Him in Whose Hands are the issues, to which few of us can attain, except through much tribulation.

It seemed hours to Evelyn, instead of only minutes, before Father Allison came back. When he did, she was trembling so that she could put no question. But he smiled reassuringly, as he took her hand.

'It's all right,' he said, with encouragement in his tone. 'I told you it would be. Clavering is what, at school, we used to call a brick, Mrs. Meredith. He bids me tell you not to take the business to heart; for, even if your husband recovers, no one besides those in the secret need ever know.'

No one need ever know! The words echoed in Evelyn's ears, bringing a blessed sense of relief; she had never thought of anything so good. After all, the outward shame, the public disgrace, the prospect of which had weighed upon her like a nightmare, might be avoided. How good, how generous Gilbert was!

'You'll go down and see him yourself now, Mrs. Meredith?' asked Father Allison, who had noted the relief and gratitude in the eyes of the poor wife. 'He is waiting; and I think it's only right you should go.'

She looked up, then down again, for the hot blood had flushed her to the roots of her hair. Allison saw her hesitation, and turned back on his way to the door.

'What is it, Mrs. Meredith?' he asked, guessing that she was wanting to say something. 'Anything else that I can do?'

Then Evelyn took her courage desperately in both hands. 'Yes,' she said; 'there's something else I want to ask you, something on which I want your advice. Suppose'—she stopped a moment, and then went on again—'suppose

a woman finds out that she—has made a great mistake and married the wrong man, what is she to do ? ’

Father Allison fixed his penetrating eyes, for a moment, upon the crimson face of the young wife, as though, before answering, he would look into the depths of her soul. The scrutiny, apparently, was satisfactory ; for a grave light, almost like a smile, came over his face as he made reply : ‘ In such a case, my daughter, there is nothing for her to do but to trust herself to God, and make the best of it.’

CHAPTER XXXIX

STEMMING THE STREAM

Here's a trial and a task—
Is it easy to bear?—if easy I'll not ask;
Though love fail, I can trust on in thy pride.

R. BROWNING: *Any Wife to Any Husband*.

Who, rowing hard against the stream,
Saw distant gates of Eden gleam,
And did not dream it was a dream.

TENNYSON: *The Two Voices*.

A BRIGHT fire burnt in the dining-room, where breakfast had been laid for three on a little table in one of the windows. Here, Evelyn found Gilbert Clavering waiting for her, standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire. Dr. Woodward had arrived and taken his place by the patient's bedside; so that, as Claude still lay quite unconscious, his wife felt that she might safely leave him for a while.

She came into the room, looking white and shaken; in spite of Father Allison's report, she was dreading this meeting greatly. But, somehow, the sight of Gilbert, warming his back so quietly, and of the preparations for breakfast upon the table, had a steadying effect upon her nerves. For plates and coffee-cups, rolls and butter, even in the temporary absence of the more sustaining concomitants, do not lend themselves readily to either tragedy or sentiment.

Nor did Gilbert Clavering appear as though he intended to play a part in anything at all emotional. His face,

always rather grave and inscrutable, had, this morning, a particularly set expression ; his lips were firm, his eyes steady. To Evelyn, he looked as if he had resolutely drawn a curtain across the scenes of the past night, and did not intend that either he or she should raise it. He came forward to greet her in the quietest and most matter-of-fact fashion.

'I see Thomas has invited me and Allison to breakfast with you,' he said, 'to judge by the number of cups and plates ; I shall not be sorry, for one, when he appears with his tray. How is the patient, by-the-by ?'

'Just the same ; I've left him with the doctor,' answered Evelyn, warming her hands at the blaze, and wondering how much he would allow her to say of the compunction and gratitude which filled her heart. Something, she felt, she must say before old Thomas made his appearance ; but, under those resolute eyes, and with that manner of quiet repression, it was not easy to broach the subject.

There was a pause of some moments, during which the flames, only, talked softly to the logs, and the rooks and the wind said a succession of breezy 'good-mornings' to each other in the trees outside.

Evelyn's heart seemed to have moved upwards and to be beating in her throat. The silence must, she felt, be broken, at any cost, though Gilbert did not seem aware of any such necessity. A door opened somewhere—Thomas must be coming with the tray ; or, was it Father Allison getting impatient for his breakfast ? Evelyn felt desperate. 'Gilbert,' she said, 'I want to thank you——' But he stopped her with a little gesture of the hand, which seemed to put aside her intention.

'There's nothing to thank me for,' he said, with a gruffness which, had she been more at leisure to observe, might have shown Evelyn that the man's feelings were less under command than they appeared to be.

'And,' she went on, speaking rapidly and refusing to be checked, 'I want to tell you how sorry—how ashamed——. Oh, Gilbert, please don't think I had anything to do with it! I only found it out quite lately, and then——' A sob choked her. She stretched out her hands appealingly, hardly knowing what she did.

Gilbert Clavering looked, for a moment, as though the iron control which he had put upon himself were going to break down. He half held out his hands to grasp Evelyn's. Then drew back, walked rapidly to the end of the room, and stood, for a moment, looking out of the window at the clouds which were flying across the sky behind the moving black pattern of the elm-branches. When he returned to the fire his face was whiter than before, but not a whit less composed, except, perhaps, for a little softening of the deep-set eyes.

'There,' he said, 'don't say any more about it; let the subject lie till he gets better—time enough to discuss it then. Don't think I blame you, Evie'—he used the name as though unconsciously—'I know you too well ever to associate you with anything not perfectly straightforward. I'll see this man, after breakfast, and shut his mouth for good and all. We must keep this matter to ourselves. Ah, here comes Thomas with the coffee and bacon! And here's Mr. Allison behind him. He's famishing, poor fellow, for I wouldn't let him wait to get so much as a crust before driving him over here.'

'Then you took the note yourself?'

'Yes, I took the note.'

That was all; and Evelyn felt that the subject was effectually closed for the present. Well, it was a relief; and yet, somehow, she felt only half satisfied.

Gilbert Clavering had suffered a tremendous wrong at the hands of the man she had married. She wanted to tell him how she detested and repudiated what had been done,

and to offer to make amends in any way in her power. To have left the house at once, taking with her the miserable man who had usurped the place of the rightful owner, was the least reparation she could think of. Yet, here was Gilbert putting wrong and apology and amends aside, as though each and all were nothing, and calmly sitting down to enjoy his breakfast. The anti-climax might be satisfactory enough to the man, but it was not so to the woman. Nor was the subject so much as alluded to during the weeks of Meredith's illness; that curtain between the past and present, which Gilbert's hand had so resolutely drawn, remained where it was for many a day.

Evelyn, indeed, had but little time to think of what lay behind it; the present claimed her too importunately for that. It is, sometimes, well for us that the present *is* importunate; for to look back or to look forward overmuch is, like star-gazing, a strain upon the vision which we poor mortals are but too likely to suffer from.

From the moment when, that breakfast over, she returned to the sick-room, it was a case of 'live for to-day' for Evelyn. For the sick man was already stirring from the death-like trance in which he had lain for the past twelve hours.

'If you find him getting too much for you, mind call at once for help, Mrs. Meredith,' Dr. Woodward said, as he prepared to leave. 'Both Mr. Clavering and Mr. Allison have promised to take your place when it can be so arranged. You mustn't tax your strength too much, my dear'—the old doctor held her hand, for a moment, and patted it in fatherly fashion—'remember how much depends on your health and strength.'

Poor Evelyn, she knew what the doctor meant. But the hope that had, quite recently, come to her, and which she had not yet had an opportunity of sharing with her husband,

so full had his mind been of outside things, now seemed to her a subject rather for regret than for rejoicing. And, as she sat by his bedside, and listened to that saddest of earthly things, the wanderings of a mind diseased and of a burdened conscience, the regret grew till it became almost beyond bearing.

'As red as blood—as red as blood,' muttered Claude Meredith, opening a pair of bloodshot eyes, which evidently saw, not the wife beside his pillow, but something far away, which none but himself could see. 'I tell you it's all red—red grass, red rocks, red wounds!' He shuddered. 'Yes, Calvert, old man,' he went on, presently, 'you're done for. But never mind. The diamonds are safe with me—Safe——? What have I done with them!'—he looked round uneasily—'I can't remember—can't remember—— But, it's all right, Calvert, all right. The boy's dead, you know. You didn't want your cousin to have them, did you, old man? So it's all right; I've put them away—done with them what you wished me to do. Weren't they in a joint-stock company—yes, that's it—a joint-stock company—all right, eh?'

A cunning look came into the glassy eyes. Evelyn shivered as she saw it. She could not keep in a little moan, as she pressed her hands together over her throbbing heart.

Was this the father of that little child to be, whose coming she had hailed with secret hope? Better never come into the world at all, she thought, than be born to such an inheritance. 'The sins of the fathers——' Ah, what a terrible legacy are they for the innocent children! She had looked forward to that coming as to a little light, a little comfort, in an otherwise dark and dreary future. But, now, the light was out, the comfort vanished; nothing but darkness and emptiness remained.

Truly, it is terrible to be obliged to sit and listen while a guilty man unwittingly pours out the long-hidden story

of a sinful past. And when the listener is bound by the closest tie to the raving patient, who is not a penitent, but, merely, an unconscious instrument of his own shame, how more than terrible is the ordeal? Not even the rack itself could inflict torture more exquisite than this. Yet Evelyn Meredith bore it resolutely, rather than allow the secret of her husband's sin to become public property. Only the two who knew it already, and with whom, as she knew, it was perfectly safe, did she allow to share her watch.

Gilbert Clavering would sit for hours, with grave, impassive face, hearing, without appearing to listen to the oft-repeated story of how he had been wronged. He was always at hand when wanted, always patient, always gentle, even with the poor sinner by whom he had been so basely defrauded. And Evelyn came to rely upon and to accept his help, as a matter of course; which, perhaps, was at the bottom of his devotion.

Father Allison, too, gave what time he could spare from the duties of his parish; and many a prayer went up to God, as he sat and listened to the unconscious revelations of this erring soul, to whom conscious confession was quite unknown. And who can deny that this intercession was unavailing on the sinner's behalf? though, as yet, there was no real repentance.

As for Dr. Woodward, he heard sufficient to guess at moral as well as physical sickness, though hardly enough to divine its nature. Like the wise man that he was, however, he made as though he heard not; which is what every doctor should do, not being a physician of the soul.

It must not be supposed, however, that Evelyn found it easy thus to fence in her patient. Those of her own family who thought their rights usurped by these 'alien nurses,' as Lady Margaret called them, were all more or less hurt and jealous. The Canon, above all, bitterly resented his exclu-

sion from the bedside of his son-in-law, and was more than ever incensed against Father Allison for his 'unwarrantable interference with, and intrusion into, another man's parish.' The Canon, it is true, was not much of a bedside visitor, especially if he had cause to fear that the sick person had anything on his mind which he might wish to get rid of. But there are few such sticklers for privilege as those who possess, without caring to use them, powers which other people show a disposition to turn to good account. The dog in the manger is an amiable animal compared with professional men in Canon Hesketh's position.

Not that he showed his teeth in public, he was much too suavely courteous for that. But, what he would not do, to his brother priest's face, he thought no harm in doing behind his back, where he growled of 'popery' and 'Jesuits' and 'wolves in the fold,' to his heart's content, with his wife for a sympathetic audience.

'I really wonder at Evelyn allowing it,' he said repeatedly. 'But he's wormed himself in, the serpent! and made himself indispensable, I suppose. How she can prefer such a reptile to an honest man, like her own father, is a wonder to me, and a cross I find it hard to take meekly. If she were not so anxious about her poor husband, I should protest—for she *sent* for that fellow, in the first instance, I believe; but, under the circumstances, I suffer in silence.'

'And you are wrong in doing so, Canon, if you will allow me to say so,' answered his spouse. 'Charity can be carried too far, as *I* think, when souls are at stake. I have stated my opinion on the matter to Evelyn. But you might as well speak to a rock as to that daughter of yours; she only refers me to the doctors. The doctors, indeed! Much they know of what is proper under the circumstances. Evelyn will get herself talked about if she insists on accept-

ing the help of two unmarried men in preference to that of her own relations. But it's of no use *my* saying anything.'

Poor Evelyn! if her relations had only known how hard it was for her to stiffen herself against their well-meant offers, or her reasons for so doing, they would, perhaps, have thought less hardly of her. But, then, could we look into the secret thoughts of those around us, how many a verdict would need cancelling.

To refuse the good offices of the two Miss Williamsons, especially those of Miss Maria, cost the young wife still more; for the spinsters were deeply hurt by the rejection of their services. Miss Maria pleaded, with tears in her mild blue eyes, for permission to sit up at nights, and so give her favourite a little rest.

'Do let me, Evie dear,' she said pathetically, 'you *know* how I love such tasks. And want of sleep wouldn't hurt me as it does the young. Have pity on yourself, dearie, and accept an old woman's services, even if you *do* think her a bit of a fidget. Now, won't you let me come?'

But Evelyn, though it cut her to the heart, was forced to refuse, knowing the perils of a talkative tongue; and the kind old lady went away sorrowful.

Time went by. Winter passed away, and spring established itself in the vacant place, slowly and tardily, as is its custom, especially in the North Countrie, till the day came when, at last, Claude Meredith's spirit returned to him, as to the Babylonish king; and, though feeble of mind and body as an infant, he was sane once more.

Then, of those who had tended him in his delirium, only Evelyn any longer appeared before him; and to her Dr. Woodward gave his opinion. 'Dr. Hedley and I are of one mind on the subject, Mrs. Meredith,' he said, after the Newcastle adept had been for his last consultation.

‘Your husband will recover; but only so far, and only for the present. There has been an injury which no skill can repair. He will never be the man he was before. He may last out a year or two—you’ll hardly keep him longer.’

He looked closely at Meredith’s wife as he spoke. How much would this verdict mean to her, he wondered, and how would she take it?

She took it very quietly, and absolutely without comment. She seemed to know the truth already, and to have accepted it, before even the consultation had taken place, which was a little humiliating for the doctors.

Soon after Claude Meredith’s return to consciousness, Gilbert Clavering asked for an interview with Evelyn. He had faced the situation. All need of his presence was now at an end. He could do no more good by remaining in the neighbourhood. He might even do harm—for he felt that a common anxiety, a common charge, had drawn him still closer to the woman he loved and, yet, must avoid. The close intercourse, which had been quite possible while their patient lay between life and death, was impossible now that life had reasserted itself. He must go, both for her sake and his own. For, though men are not so quick at divining these things as women, in Gilbert Clavering’s mind there was a conviction, amounting to more than a guess, that what he had hoped and desired and prayed for in vain, while it was free to give, was his, without asking, now that it was free no longer. Such is the irony of Fate; or shall we not, rather, call it the discipline which makes perfect the soldier of the Cross? A hard discipline, indeed, and painful to submit to; yet, without it, could mortal flesh and blood have victory in what is essentially a spiritual combat? Once allow this, and what the heathen resented as cruel sport on the part of the all-powerful gods, the

Christian can accept as the wise ordering of a loving and far-seeing Providence, that does nothing but with a view to our greater good.

And Gilbert Clavering, in his reserved and silent way, was learning this lesson. Never a selfish man, as men go, he was, moreover, learning unselfishness in the hard school which he had entered when all that seemed most desirable in life was suddenly taken from him. He could think for the woman he loved, and consider her good before his own. He knew, as he waited for her in the morning-room, where the pale April sun gleamed fitfully through the window looking on the rookery, and a cheerful fire defied and set it at naught from the opposite grate, that, during the next few minutes, he must put her to pain. But, like the short work of the surgeon's knife, it was necessary pain, and would soon be over. And better such pain than the comparative ease which, in the end, may bring forth death.

She came in, looking like April herself in her light tweed dress, with its white chemisette and green silk tie. The slightly fragile look in her usually so fresh face, brought about by much anxiety and long watching, increased her likeness to the month of pale half tints and tentative growth. And, though the mouth smiled, there was a moist look in the golden eyes which told that the smile was not to be trusted. 'Well, Gilbert,' she said, 'what do you want with me, this morning? You never come now unless you want something, you know!' She accompanied the words with a little pout of her full red lips.

'Never come now?' he raised his eyebrows with attempted mockery, which, however, was not very successful; for Gilbert Clavering was a sorry actor. 'Why, it's only three days since my presence as nurse was dispensed with. You can do without me now, Evelyn.'

The mockery quite vanished and turned to sober seriousness in the last sentence.

A rather frightened look came into the girl's eyes. 'What do you mean?' she asked quickly; 'you're not going to leave Hatherlea?'

'Yes, I am. And not only Hatherlea, but England. I'm returning to South Africa at once.'

'Gilbert!' The April face lost all its colour and sunshine, the light died out of the golden eyes. For human faces are like the earth: a sudden cloud, passing across the sky, can take away all light and colour, and make the difference between life and death.

Gilbert's heart almost failed him, as he saw that look. It told him, more plainly than before, that he was the sun in Evelyn's sky, and that his going would leave her life dark and cheerless. But his resolution held him; it was not made of such flimsy stuff as Claude Meredith's.

'Yes,' he said quietly, 'I'm quite well again now, and have no excuse for remaining away from my duties any longer. Won't you sit down? I want to talk to you about this business of your husband's. I've put my affairs into the hands of Messrs. Wilson, of Newcastle. No, don't be frightened; they don't know any more than that your husband has had losses, which have compelled him to part with the property to me—there will be no exposure. And, Evelyn, I want you to act for me here. I shall feel quite safe if I know I leave my interests in your hands. You and your husband will continue to live here, during my absence, and you and Robson, the agent, will manage the property for me, as soon as the transfer is made.'

'Oh, no, Gilbert! You are too good, too generous; but it—it cannot be!'

Evelyn's voice was trembling, like a rush, in the wind of feeling which was sweeping over her. Her lips quivered,

and the tears came into her eyes ; she pressed her hands together to keep herself still.

‘Why can’t it be?’ Gilbert’s face was stonily impassive. He asked the question in the most matter-of-fact voice—he forced himself to do so ; for those tears were sapping his courage, and melting his heart. ‘It is just the one thing I want you to do for me, Evelyn. You can’t refuse me, I think?’

A sob rose in Evelyn’s throat ; it was a moment or two before she could speak. ‘No. Could I refuse you anything—under the circumstances, Gilbert? I would do anything to make amends.’

A strange, burning look came into the man’s eyes. In the mouth of any other woman than Evelyn Meredith, he could not help thinking what the words might have implied. But, with her, there was no room to suspect a double meaning ; she was so absolutely pure-minded and candid. He chid himself for the momentary thought. ‘Well,’ he said gently, ‘do *that*. Stay on here ; and, from time to time, give me an account of your stewardship. I leave my interests in your hands with perfect confidence.’

Evelyn raised her eyes and gave him a look which remained in Gilbert’s memory long afterwards. There was such a world of gratitude and feeling in her golden eyes—they glowed with warmth and light. This proof of his confidence, after what happened, went to the depths of her heart.

‘Thank you,’ she said simply.

He rose to go. The interview had tried both of them, and seemed to him to have lasted long enough.

‘Good-bye, Evelyn.’ He held out his hands and took both of hers.

Her lips quivered like those of a child that is going to cry.

'Oh, Gilbert, *must* you go?' she said in a low, shaken voice; 'I don't know what I shall do without you!'

He looked her earnestly in the face, as though he were learning every curve of it by heart.

'Yes, Evie,' he said, and his voice was deep with hardly suppressed feeling, 'there is no help for it. Good-bye.'

But still she clung to his hands. A tear fell upon them. She returned his gaze with a look of piteous appeal.

It was a moment that tried to the utmost Gilbert Clavering's strength of will. 'Her husband has wronged you—why not take *this* by way of amends?' Something seemed to whisper the temptation in his ears. But he put it from him. 'For her sake as well as my own I must hold out,' he thought; and again he said 'Good-bye.'

'And when will you come back?' the tears were dropping freely.

'Not till—— afterwards,' said Gilbert Clavering; and he let go her hands, and went out of the room without once turning to look behind him.

That 'afterwards' was enigmatical. Evelyn wondered more than once, in the days that followed, what he could have meant. But, if her heart jumped to a conclusion, she refused to let her mind follow it; which, when a mystery is safer left in doubt, is, perhaps, the wisest thing to do.

CHAPTER XL

THE TRUCE OF GOD

The black minute's at end—

With God be the rest !

R. BROWNING : *Michelagnolo*.

CLAUDE MEREDITH lay quite still, looking, with eyes which still seemed but half awake, at his wife, who sat sewing beside his bed. She was making a small garment of very fine cambric, and the face that bent over the work had in it a look that was full of sadness.

Meredith watched the hand, as it drew the needle in and out, with a sort of fascination. He was not conscious of wonder as to what she was about ; and yet he had a feeling as though he would like to know, if only he could exert himself sufficiently to ask.

As yet he had never put any direct questions to those about him, nor had he alluded to the circumstances which had brought about his illness. Only, sometimes, his eyes would ask what his tongue did not, and a sort of embarrassment would seem to trouble him and hinder him from meeting the eyes of his wife. Perhaps, he was wondering how much she knew. This afternoon, for the first time, he put his thought into words.

‘ Evie,’ he asked, in a voice almost as feeble as that of an infant, ‘ what are you making ?’

She started, dropped her work in her lap, and turned red and pale ; but her answer was quite quiet.

'A baby's shirt,' she said.

'A baby's? Whose baby?'

Evelyn could see how a sudden eagerness came into Claude's eyes as he waited for her answer; but she controlled herself sternly. She would not let him see what bitterness he had brought into a prospect which should have been so sweet.

'For—— for mine,' she replied, with just a momentary hesitation in the choice of the pronoun.

'For ours?'

'Yes; for ours.'

The man's eyes glistened. He breathed quickly; then he reached out a thin hand and laid it on his wife's, which lay upon the little bit of cambric in her lap.

'I did not know, Evie,' he said; 'I'm glad—aren't you?'

Evelyn Meredith was silent. What could she say? She was conscious of a strange feeling of resentment against the putting of the question. Claude looked at her wistfully. Then, after waiting a long time for the answer which did not come, he said, with a sigh:

'Then you're *not* glad. Is it because I—I'm his father? Have I disgraced myself too much to be worthy of a son—or daughter? Can't you forgive me for his sake? If I've sinned I've been heavily punished. God knows I've suffered!'

He covered his face with his wasted hands, and the tears of weakness trickled between his fingers. If it goes to a man's heart to see a woman weep, how much more is a woman melted by the rarer sight of a man's tears? Evelyn Meredith was not proof against them, bitterly though she had resented her husband's treason. She put aside her work, kneeled down beside the bed, and, drawing one of her husband's hands down from his face, held it in both her own.

'Don't, Claude !' she said brokenly ; ' don't !'

'Then you forgive me ?'

'Yes, I forgive you. It's not against *me* you've sinned the worst. As *he* forgave you, and told me to tell you so, I've no right to hold out. But, oh, Claude, it's been a miserable, miserable business ! And he has been so good, so generous. If you only knew !'

'Who do you mean ?' A dark look had come into Claude Meredith's face. He clenched his hand, as at a sudden remembrance.

'Who ? Why, Gilbert Clavering.'

'D—— Gilbert Clavering !' Claude muttered the words under his breath ; but Evelyn heard them. She drew herself up, and looked at him in reproachful surprise. So this was her husband's penitence !

'Perhaps,' she said ; 'when I tell you that he has not only forgiven the wrong you have done him, but has managed to hide the disgrace from the world ; that he is allowing us to live on here and see to things while he is out in Africa, just as though there was nothing amiss, you will bless instead of cursing him.'

'Has he done this—*really* ?' Claude seemed touched. 'Then, Evelyn, it is for your sake, not mine. Are you—is he——?' He hesitated how to put the question in definite shape ; he was ashamed to do so in any guise, when he met the candid eyes of his wife. To have thrown a doubt upon her would, he saw, have been an unmerited insult, which she would never forgive. 'He is a better fellow than I thought,' he said, as though to himself. 'There are not many who would have done as much. Evie ?'

'Yes ?'

'I know I've been a bad fellow ; but when I tell you I'd give the world to undo what I've done, I'm not saying too much. I know I've lost your love and respect ; but,

will you try to give me a little of them again—just a little, for the sake of that little chap that's coming ?'

There was a very pathetic look in Claude Meredith's rather shifty eyes ; it was easy to see that he was very much in earnest. He held out his hand. Evelyn took it ; but, to a nature as sincere and honest as was her own, it was difficult to find an answer which should be, at the same time, sufficient and true.

'I'll try,' she said simply. And if Claude was not satisfied he could not press for a further assurance ; for he knew he had, at any rate, got more than he deserved. He shut his eyes and settled himself to rest, like a man who has got something off his mind ; and Evelyn took up her sewing again, and sat watching him, without appearing to do so, till he fell into a deep sleep. Then the little garment dropped from her hands, and, with a sob which was hardly restrained, she fell upon her knees by the bed. 'Oh, baby, baby, it's hard upon you, dear !' she whispered, resting her forehead upon the tiny bit of cambric at which she had been sewing, 'hard that you should not have a father to respect, like more fortunate little ones. But, never mind ; your mother will try to make it up to you. Neither he nor you shall ever have a word to say against me. For I'll keep my promise and try to be a good wife to him—for your sake, baby, dear.'

EPILOGUE

If it be the old man's daughter
That we wot of—What then?

JEAN INGELow: *Requiescat in Pace.*

THE high-backed bridge of Hatherlea had its usual contingent of loiterers, set all a-row, with elbows leaning on the parapet, head on hands, and eyes lazily watching the water, which ran, talking softly as it went, under the arch below.

The men above were talking too, and their voices mingled with that of the water in a duet between bass and treble, which was not unpleasant to hear, though the human voices were all more or less rough, and more racy than musical by reason of the Northumbrian burr.

It was an August evening, over a year later than the events which had made a nine days' wonder of the folk at Hatherlea Hall. A gold and crimson sky looked at itself in a gold and crimson river. The swallows hawked at the flies above, and the fish leaped at them from below the shining surface. The air was so still that not a single leaf upon the willows, which edged the water-side, turned its silver lining outwards. Away in the distance the hills and moors showed, soft and dusky, against the light-filled sky.

'Folks is sayin',' said the big landlord of the Clavering Arms, after puffing in silence for some minutes at his favourite clay-pipe, 'folks is sayin' that Mr. Clavering is on his way home; comin' tae his own again, as the sayin' is. It nivvor did seem tae me to be reit, wantin' a Claver-

ing at Hatherlea Harl. New folks is nivvor nowt like t' auld 'uns.'

'Ye're reit there, Mistor Ridley,' responded the tailor, taking out his own pipe, and knocking the ashes from it against the stonework of the bridge. 'Wor proper gentry hez arlways been Claverings. 'Tother name nivvor sounded reit in *my* ears; it wasn't made to last. Shoddy it was, compared to guid homespun. We arl ken what *that* is.'

'Ay, ye see to that, Joseph Nash,' said the village blacksmith, with a twinkle in his eyes. 'That last suit ye made me had nae mair wear in't than a lady's handkercher.'

A laugh ran along the row of human figures which decorated the bridge. The tailor, however, was quick with a retort.

'When a man is willin' to pay for guid stuff he gets it,' said the little man. 'When he beats doon the price, and winnot pay but for shoddy's worth—why, then he gets it, an' arl. What else can ye expect?'

There was another laugh, this time at the blacksmith's expense; for all Hatherlea knew that Robert Snaith held his purse-strings close.

But the little digression, which had led the conversation from the all-absorbing subject of the owner of Hatherlea Hall to the much less interesting one of the Hatherlea tailor's goods, did not long endure. Thought quickly drifted back into the original channel.

'It's a queer stowery,' remarked the barber; 'Ah, for yan, cud nivvor reitly mak't oot. Folks *say* Mr. Meredith lost money, and Mr. Clavering cam' into a fortun' and bought t' auld pleace back wi't; but it's *queer*.'

'Ay, it's queer,' agreed the landlord. 'And it's queer, and arl, aboot yon accident, as they carl it, that happened Mr. Meredith, and brought aboot his death at the hinder end. Folks disn't happen sich like accidents in the nat'rel

run o' things. Ah carl it suicide, mysel', though Ah wouldn't hev put that name to it while the poor gentleman was alive.'

'Nay, Mistor Ridley, ye wouldn't; ye're ower canny for that. It meit have damaged yer custom.'

'Hoots, man!' was the landlord's contemptuous rejoinder to this remark, which was contributed by one of the Hall gardeners. 'Ye divent ken what ye're tarkin' about. *My* custom isn't that easy destroyed. Folks arl ken where to get guid liquor, and sae lang as liquor's good, a bit worrd like yon winnot destroy custom.'

'Weel, onyhoo, he's gone, puir gentleman,' sighed the sexton, with the dismal droop of the countenance which he thought appropriate to his calling. 'It matters little *how* folks gan, sae lang as they fill their graves as weel as Mr. Meredith; he was a fine figure of a man. But there, he's gone the way arl flesh must gan—the way we maun travel wor-selves when wor time cam's.'

'And we'll wait till it dis, if *you* please, before we bring up the subject,' said the landlord in a tone of disgust. 'Ye're ower fond of corpses, David Kirk.'

There was a pause which no one seemed in a hurry to fill after this unpleasant allusion had been made to destroy, like a taint, the flavour of the gossip. It was the landlord, finally, who relieved the tension and set the current flowing again.

'Mistress Meredith and her little lad 'll hev to torn out now, likely,' he said, with reflection in his voice, as he puffed away at his pipe. 'She's a real lady that, and she's norsed her poor husband like an angel—ivvory porsin allows that, though it's weel ken't the poor gentleman was not joost easy to manish.'

'Mebbes, she winnot torn out, eftor arl,' remarked the barber; 'we arl ken that Mr. Clavering was sweet upon

her, afore she wedded the late squire. Ah thowt he wad hev got her, yance ; but t'other man cam' along and took her fancy. She'd hev done a deal better tor wed Clavering nor Meredith, as *Ah* think.'

'Mebbes, she'll wed them both afore she's done. A mair convenienter arrangement, under the circumstances, couldn't weel be,' put in the tailor ; 'not that Ah'm pointin' at onything again' the laidy—wor Miss Evelyn, as we used to carl her, is above arl that, but——'

'But Ah'll thank ye to hold yer tongue !' burst out the blacksmith, with a bang of his great fist upon the parapet, which made the little tailor, who was next him, jump. 'Ah winnot stand by and hear wor Miss Evelyn's name sae much as touched by ony gossiping lips. Ah'll nivvor forget how she saved wor lile Willie's life when he was ill wi' the convolutions. An angel ? Ah should joost think she was !'

'Ay, it wad, mebbes, be mair discreet to say nowt about sich a delicate matter as a new-made widdie's second marriage till we see what she and t' squire hev to say about it,' remarked the landlord, with politic reserve. 'Not that there'd be ony harm in sich a weddin', if it ivvor cam' off ; nothing cud be mair suitable, as *Ah* think. But there's a discretion, as Ah was sayin', tor be observed in sich-like matters, and discretion's the better part o' valour.'

'Deed, an' it is, landlord ! Ye're reit there !' cried the blacksmith, with another sledge-hammer-like bang of his fist upon the parapet ; 'and, Ah can tell ye, that, if discretion isn't obsorved consarning Mistress Meredith, the man that fails in it will hev to show his valour to me—if he's got any, that is.'

'Weel, weel, Robbie,' responded the landlord, taking the hint and speaking in his most conciliatory tones ; for all the village had a great respect for Robert Snaith's prowess as a boxer and wrestler ; '*that's* arl reit. Ye've put a full

stop tor this subject o' conversation. What Ah propose now is that we arl torn into the Hatherlea Arms and drink to the very good health of the reitful heir, and of Mistress Meredith and her bairn. What's tor come is in the bosom o' the future ; 'tis the present we hev tor do with—no time like the present say I ! But, arl t' seame, if t' futur' was tor bring about yon little matter—we'll mention nae mair at present—Hatherlea Bridge would shoot "Hooray !"

Thus the subject was amicably laid to rest, over landlord Ridley's pots of ale, in which Gilbert Clavering's and Evelyn Meredith's healths were duly drunk, to everyone's satisfaction. But whether any more came of the matter is more than I can tell you. It is always interesting to leave something for people to guess.

THE END.

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